

Ouray, Colorado: Sense of Place in the Modern Wild West

By

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Abstract

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The small town of Ouray, nestled at 8,000 feet within the rugged San Juan volcanic mountain range in southwestern Colorado, is a memorable place for many individuals. A mining community turned tourist destination, Ouray is a place of economic transitions and identity shifts. This research outlines three different social groups of Ouray—lifelong local residents, those who have recently moved to Ouray, and part-time summer resident workers— and discusses how they interact on a daily basis. Through a series of formal interviews and personal observations, it discusses the meaning Ouray holds for individuals and explores the concept of place attachment.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank my friends in Ouray for sharing their thoughts and their town with me. Without their willingness to open up to me, this thesis would have lost all nuance. I feel so privileged to know the wonderfully unique characters described in this text.

I wish to thank my advisor James “Pete” Shortridge for always putting up with my wacky research ideas and reassuring me that studies like this one are very much worth doing. His dedication and numerous edits penciled into margins are an invaluable resource for which I am hugely grateful.

I also need to thank my family for sharing in my passion for Ouray and allowing me at age sixteen to go live in their cabin. I know that they all were timid about sending me out there alone, but I am thankful that they recognized my insatiable need to be in the San Juans. I doubt they expected me to live and work there periodically for ten years and write a hundred pages about it!

As I was writing this last little bit of this thesis, I was informed of the loss of a dear friend from Ouray. This research inadvertently touched upon the tendency in Ouray towards substance abuse, as it came up many times in my interviews. I am reminded most obviously today of the severity of that issue in this place. I hope that it comes through these pages that it is not simply an issue of partying in a beautiful setting, but that Ouray can be a tough landscape of constant struggle for many individuals. For some, life in Ouray is a perpetual climb up the mountainside. The rugged landscape is stunning, but also unforgiving.

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Prologue

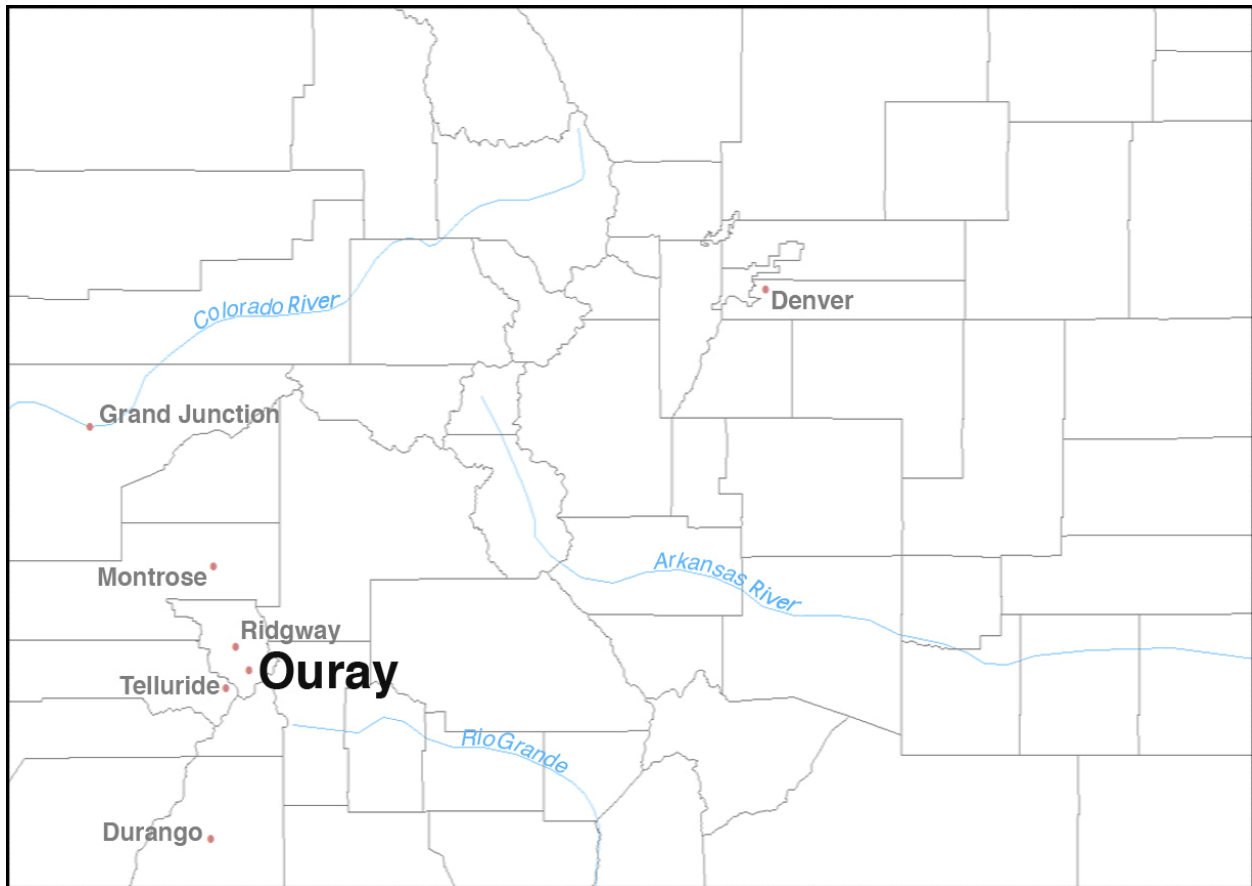
In the summers I live in the far northeast corner of Ouray. My local friends have joked that my “Kansas House,” as it has been called, is precisely where it should be—as close to Kansas as I could be in town. I cannot thank Ouray enough for the many things it has given me over the years, and particularly for opening its nooks and crannies to this project. Ouray isn’t always an easy place to be, but with a little effort, one can find there a deep sense of belonging. My attachment to this place is strong and certainly will come through in this thesis. Once you are in, it’s incredible the amount of credit you are given. I’m very thankful that I’ve been able to live and work as I have in the San Juans.

I have tried to be mindful that local people would read my words here. I want to represent Ouray as they shared it with me, but a delicate balance exists between celebrating and denigrating a place, as good and bad things come up anytime you interview people. It isn’t angels and demons, but a continuum. Science has tended to demonize and problematize issues of place. Many researchers will overcompensate for this and romanticize. I’ve tried to find a middle ground. Many Ouray people, I believe, would not want to be romanticized and like having an “edge.” I’ve done my best to represent that here.

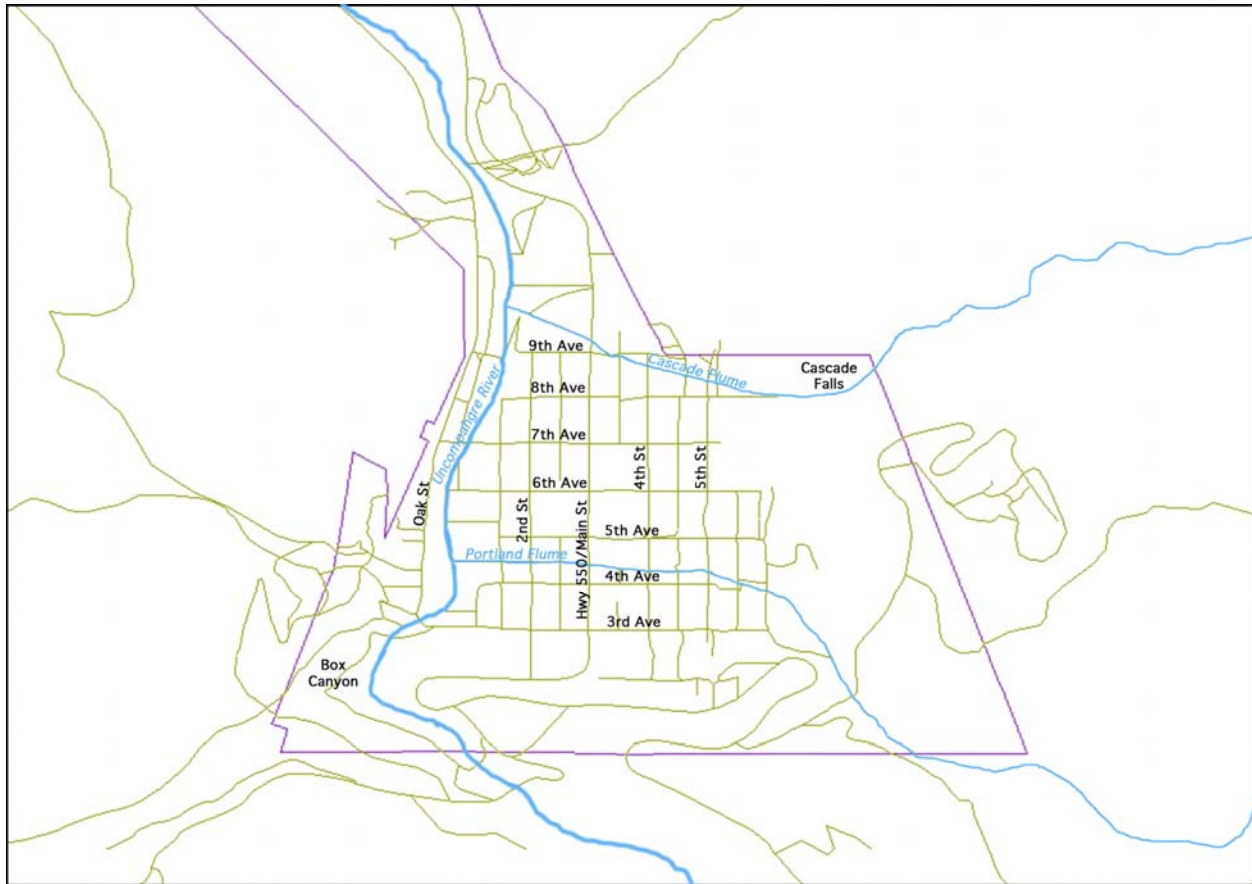
I have been knowingly partial. I am conscious of my limitations and have tried to focus on meanings rather than laws. I have made an effort to bring attention to particulars of place and actual circumstances rather than construct generalities stereotyping the town.

Every summer I welcome the culture and climate shock of going back to Ouray—to small-town, high-elevation life. With every bit of work I wasn’t able to do in situ, I longed to be there. The views, the air, the isolation, the people—it’s wild and I love it. Like Ouray in many

ways, I oscillate back and forth between wanting to share this place with everyone I meet and wanting it to remain a well-kept secret. In the end, I couldn't help but share.



Map 1: Colorado Reference Map, by author via 2009 Census Tiger Data, National Earth, and National Atlas, August 2010.



Map 2: City of Ouray (with town limits in purple), by author using 2009 Census Tiger Data, August 2010.

Chapter 1: Introduction

When I inhabit a place—whether by moving through it or staying in it—I *have* it in my actional purview. I also *hold* it by virtue of being in its ambiance: first in my body as it holds onto the place by various sensory and kinesthetic means, then in my memory as I “hold it in mind.” (Casey 2001, 687)



Figure 1: View of Ouray looking southwest, photo by author, July 2009.

Place perceptions depend on human experience. From person to person, a place will hold vastly different meanings. Whether as a birthplace, a favorite vacation spot, or a neighborhood passed through on daily commutes, each individual thinks of a place as a complex collection of sensory experiences. It is a challenge to tap into individuals' personal feelings, but by doing so we may gather information towards a collective sense of place. By focusing on landmarks,

shared beliefs, or cultural settlement patterns, for example, a story begins to come together. The more measures we use, the more complete the story. Finding common themes among a wide variety of perceptions is the heart of a sense-of-place study.

I have chosen to study sense of place in the small mountain town of Ouray, Colorado (Figure 1). Having a unique geographic setting paired with unusual social relations, Ouray is a memorable place for many individuals. The town is nestled at an elevation of eight thousand feet within the San Juan volcanic mountain range. Known now for ice climbing and other recreational activities (e. g. Geraci 1999, Holmes 2007, McMahon 2004, Olsson 2007), its history is that of a tumultuous mining town. Ouray was named after a controversial leader of the Ute nation (1833-1880), a man of partial Apache descent who is remembered for his keen negotiation skills with the United States government. Accounts of the Ute experience in Ouray vary greatly (Decker 2004, Houston 2005, Pettit 1990, Rockwell 1956 and 1965, Smith 1986, Wroth 2000) but all emphasize stereotypic Wild West themes. Expressions of such exaggerated indigenous heritage can be seen today in a variety of ways. More interesting, however, are aspects of the town's indigenous history that go largely undisclosed and will be discussed in chapter four.

Perched atop rich mineral deposits, Ouray County experienced a mining boom late in the nineteenth century that filled the town with cardsharps and prostitutes (Bueler 1974). Stories of these mining days still circulate regularly and constitute a history the entire town feels it owns. After the silver was exhausted, a fire destroyed many buildings and most of the people left (Gregory 1995). In addition to silver, Ouray was fortunate to have gold sprinkled throughout town. This gold is what allowed Ouray to survive through decades of trying times. In the last

twenty-five years, however, this town has parlayed its exceptional natural beauty into a successful tourist economy (Gregory 1997).

Remnants of Ouray's "Wild West" are evident in the current cultural landscape. From mountain rides in mining carts to "Olde Tyme Portraits," visitors can experience a cartoonlike version of nineteenth-century mining culture. The downtown consists of intact historical buildings and large Victorian homes—a constant reminder of history. Local folklore has it that Ouray also once had an extensive network of underground tunnels to facilitate movement of various illegal activities. Today, the tunnels are gone, but the tendency to operate in a lawless fashion is still strong.

Ouray possesses a mere nine hundred year-round residents. Sometimes colorfully called Ouraynians, these people must either be independently wealthy or flexible workers/business owners to survive winter isolation. Their world changes abruptly every summer, the primary tourist season. Hiking, 4-wheeling, rock climbing, and repelling bring in visitors by the thousands plus dozens of seasonal workers. Ouraynians gauge the tourist season, and therefore their annual success, on July 4th business (Figure 2).

Outside of the summer, Ouray is much quieter. A secondary peak of visitors comes in the autumn as the aspen leaves change colors, and recently winter tourism has increased. Promoting the town as the "Ice Climbing Capital of the United States," local people now flood the walls of Box Canyon with layers of ice. Additional winter income comes from attracting tourists with discounts on lift tickets for the Telluride ski resort area an hour away.

As an exploration of local perceptions of a place, this study is necessarily a foray into unknown territory, or *terrae incognitae*, to use the words of John K. Wright (1947). Whereas Ouray can be pinpointed on a map with ease and its history outlined with precise dates,

Ouraynians' views of themselves and their town remain virtually uncharted territory. Still, within a small pool of local residents, shared stories, shared troubles, and a shared sense of place act together to define local identity. Citizens of Ouray become local experts over time in this way, rehearsing place attachments and local histories (Tuan 1991).



Figure 2: July 4, 2008 water fights, photo courtesy of Jeff Burgess.

Cary de Wit's dissertation *Sense of Place on the American High Plains* (1997) provides much insight to local perspectives in places of isolation. He writes about the difficulties of interpersonal relationships with a limited population pool as well as the benefits of a tightly knit community. These themes apply to Ouray as much as they do the Great Plains. de Wit also discusses how his isolated, rural communities often define themselves against outside "others." In this way, he identified an "us-versus-them" mindset that allows a community to describe itself

as unique. As a town in transition, Ouray similarly defines itself as being different than other mountain communities—different because of physical geography, economic activities, and socio-cultural factors.

I also found valuable counsel in the work of folklorist Kent Ryden on the mining district of Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. He found that it does not take a heavily populated, booming metropolis to elicit strong connections to place and a deep sense of local identity. “. . . A complex, deeply felt sense of place can emerge whenever and wherever people settle on the land long enough to develop shared experiences and tell stories about those experiences” (Ryden 1993, 99). Ryden goes on to address such connections in landscapes of isolation and contempt such as one finds in northern Idaho.

A shift in the general American cultural perception of the Rocky Mountains occurred in the mid-nineteenth century. From being seen as a landscape of fear, mountains began to evoke feelings of aesthetic beauty. Economic aspects of the area evolved as well. A preoccupation with mining and other resource extraction gave way to one of travel and recreational incentives. Geographer Kevin S. Blake has done considerable research on the aesthetics and meaning of mountain peaks (Blake 2002). His work focuses on the Rocky Mountains as a whole, but includes one paper specifically on the San Juan range (Blake 1999). Although I will briefly outline shifts in Rocky Mountain perception throughout American history, my focus is on modern times. As Blake discusses in his work, it was not until the mid-1980s that the Rockies began to evoke in Americans the deep emotional ties to the landscape that they do today. Recreation boomed and the cultural landscape of places like Ouray changed dramatically (Blake 2002). Peter R. Decker similarly outlines change in the San Juans in his book *Old Fences, New*

Neighbors (1998). Although he focuses on the conversion of rangeland to wealthy subdivisions, this is the only book that addresses recent landscape change of Ouray County.

I believe that historical perceptions of Ouray as a mining center are very much intertwined with the current recreation/tourism landscape, and thus, cannot be ignored. Likewise, the indigenous landscape of Ouray is still held in high regard by local people. Ute tribal imagery is everywhere and often strategically used in tourism business. The lives of miners and indigenous peoples have been romanticized in the current cultural landscape. A discussion of these historical cultural landscapes of Ouray is therefore critical to understanding how the perceptions of Ouray today were formed.

For historical perspective on life in Ouray in the early twentieth century, I turned to David Lavender's *One Man's West* (1956). Lavender grew up in the area and his account not only details the natural landscape of Ouray, but also mining activities and sense of place as he knew it in the early twentieth century. Harriet Fish Backus' *Tomboy Bride* (1969) is an autobiographical account broken into parts of her life and begins with marriage to her miner husband in the San Juans. Backus' text stood alone in my research as a pioneer woman's historical perspective. Caroline Arlen put together a series of interview transcriptions about mining ties in Colorado, many of which were from Ourayites (2002). Those interviews provided richer detail about life underground than other historical sources. An oral history compilation called *The Way It Was* (1990) was consulted during my research as well. In it, Bachman and Tod Bacigalupi, a newcomer and a part-time local, interviewed long-time residents and gave voice to history in Ouray in the early twentieth century. I found this work useful in substantiating my historical findings and in comparing their research to local perceptions today. By reading historical accounts, I was able to sense the shared cultural history many locals speak

of today. Many other scholars have written in more general terms about the juxtaposition of devastating mining and timber exploitation alongside the beloved, aesthetic landscape of the Rocky Mountains (e.g. Hyde in Wrobel and Steiner 1997, Wyckoff and Dilsaver 1995). Ouray's San Juans are no exception.

Geographer Robert Sack (1997) has argued that all issues of place can be defined by the interactions of three elements: nature, social relations, and meaning. Using this framework, I begin my interpretation of Ouray by exploring its natural and cultural history. Next, I outline the different social groups there—from locals to tourists— and how they interact on a daily basis. I will examine not only the demographics of Ouray today, but also how this population has changed over time. Then, continuing with Sack's framework, I discuss the meaning this place holds for individuals. Several degrees of "local" exist in Ouray: people born there, people who moved in later in life by choice, and people who live locally only part of the year. My story examines what "local" means in Ouray and looks at the community from all three local perspectives. To at least some degree, the results I find may be extrapolated to that of many other small isolated places. Small-town life has long been a subject of interest to Americans (e.g. Feld and Basso 1996, Grumprecht 2003, Lewis 1972). Furthermore, since Ouray shares common themes with other tourist towns, my work should contribute to the growing field of tourism geography (e.g. Francaviglia 1995, Shaw and Williams 2002, Mitchell and Murphy 1991, Vance 1972).

Philosopher Edward S. Casey has built on Sack's thinking about the globalized world by explaining that it is the relationship between place and self rather than places themselves that is in flux. With increases in actual travel and in virtual experience via the Internet, people and places both experience desiccation. In other words, they are drained of meaningful vitality. But

Casey has proposed a new body that may exist intermediate between place and self: the habitus.

Through the merging of place and self in a modern, thin world, this habitus grows:

Places come into us lastingly; once having been in a particular place for any considerable time—or even briefly, if our experience there has been intense—we are forever marked by that place which lingers in us indefinitely and in a thousand ways, many too subtle for us to name. The inscription is not of edges or outlines, as if places were some kind of object; it is of the whole brute presence of the place. What lingers most powerfully is this presence and, more particularly, *how it felt to be in this presence*: how it felt to be in the Crazy Mountains that summer . . . (Casey 2001, 688).

No definitive set of sources embodies the geographic subdiscipline of sense-of-place studies. Among the many different approaches that have influenced my thesis framework, Yi-Fu Tuan's *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* is a good place to start (1977). Tuan explored the broad theme of human experience in place, starting with environmental relationships during childhood and then following this theme to adulthood concepts of place attachment and place meaning.

John Western writes about perceptions of home in his 1992 book on Barbadian Londoners. Although his setting is quite different from my Ouray, Western's thoughts on leaving home and reflecting on a beloved place have influenced my thoughts. Similarly, Keith Basso's essay "Wisdom Sits in Places: Notes on a Western Apache Landscape," (in Feld and Basso 1996) has given me much insight on the indigenous landscape of Ouray. He suggests that sense of place from an indigenous perspective likely was and is very different than that of the white majority population of Ouray. I reflected on this essay to gain a better understanding of different ways in which individuals may perceive attachment to places.

Kathleen Stewart has written about culture and values in an isolated boom-and-bust mining town in West Virginia (in Feld and Basso 1996). Although the culture in Ouray is vastly different, I found many parallels with her town of Amigo, and learned much from her use of

local language to convey place meaning. Small towns like those mining communities of rural West Virginia are often considered to be on the fringes of mainstream American culture. Just like the town of Amigo, Ouray is stuck somewhere between dreams of progress and memories of the way Ouray “used to” be (Stewart 1996, 105). Drawing on the work of philosophers Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin, Stewart uses language throughout her work in a diacritical manner. She believes that language has value on its own rather than through reference, and therefore her research on West Virginia mining communities is a representation of place on its own.

Stewart’s phenomenological work on Amigo relies upon the idea that moments of clarity and historical insight happen (i. e. dialectical images) in everyday life through the use of everyday talk. Speech is a cultural form in other words, and its poetics create place meaning. Furthermore, Stewart’s work not only examines the performative work of speech, but is also a performance in itself. It does not just simply represent or reflect the places she discusses, it also constructs something new because of her incorporation of language. Her academic argument is centered on fieldwork and place-based experiences coming together in a unique way from which I drew much inspiration.

The literature on mining communities is extensive. As discussed above, Kent Ryden’s *Mapping the Invisible Landscape* (1993) is part of this. Geographers David Robertson (2006), Ben Marsh (1987), and Richard Francaviglia (1991) similarly explore this setting and, unlike many works that discuss mining communities only from settlement through “boom” eras, they trace sense of place after the “bust.” I learned much from these works, as Ouray is also a town that has persevered beyond the mining era and taken on a new way of life.

Because interviewing local residents was key to my research, I found Scott Russell Sanders' *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World* to be useful (1993). Sanders wrote of his childhood home in rural Ohio and how his deep attachment to that place developed. Sanders clearly articulates the meaning he holds of his home and writes of a sense of rootedness in place. Place attachment and a love of ones home were common discussions I held with my interviewees.

Having lived and worked in Ouray for nine consecutive summers, I feel I have unique insight into this place. Spending part of last winter there was important, too, giving me much more credibility as a semilocal in town and allowing me to see the town at a time when its mood is vastly different from the summer. Although many people have written about Ouray's history or natural beauty (e.g. Bueler 1974, Gregory 1989, and Kent 1974), its current problems, concerns, and sense of self have been ignored. Giving a fuller voice to this place is the ultimate goal of my research.

Chapter 2: Methods

All stories are true and some actually happened. (Hartman 2009)

This research focuses on how local residents perceive Ouray. I am interested in traits all residents agree upon as well as possible differences in feelings between lifelong residents, later-in-lifers, and part-timers. If someone recently moved to Ouray or lives there as a part-time worker, I wanted to find out why he/she chose Ouray? What aspects of life in Ouray do people find appealing and unappealing? Furthermore, how do the three local groups feel about each other?

I have a deep personal attachment to Ouray, and integrate my opinions about this place into the historical and interview material I found. To minimize ethical concerns, I try to be forthcoming on the pages that follow and declare my perceptions and opinions to be just that. Not only is it impossible to be universally objective in a study such as this, such a goal would be counterproductive. Reflexivity, or the ability to examine one's self, is a solid research tool if used judiciously, and was important to me here.

Although many of my insights into Ouray come from informal observations and casual conversation over the last decade, I also conducted twenty-four formal interviews in this study. For these, I did not survey a representative sample of the Ouray population. Rather, I relied upon local connections and gained informants through the "snowballing" technique within the three principal groups: lifelong locals, recent movers to Ouray, and part-time residents. Within these divisions, I tried to make my initial contacts as varied as possible and am convinced my "snowballs" ultimately are quite representative of the town's diversity. The interviews themselves varied in length, the shortest being about an hour long and with many lasting an

entire afternoon. I met many interviewees at their homes and several more at local businesses for discussions over coffee. The generosity of these people was astounding, with so many happy to share their lives. For three people I was unable to get together with in town (Albritton, Kenning, and Gonzales), we talked over the phone. Incidentally, these three happened to be with people I knew well and were among the longest and most fruitful discussions in the sample.

I compiled a list of thirteen questions (see Appendix A) to serve as a guideline for each interview although these topics usually only scratched the surface of the material we would cover throughout the session. More than anything, I prepared these questions to ensure a degree of commonality among all the interviews and as a caution against any of them getting off track or stalling into silence. Each interview covered the thirteen questions plus lots more information that came up naturally through conversation. The most valuable information I gathered came out of the casual chatting during my interviews. Instead of directly reading the thirteen questions, I worked them into our conversations—which often ended up being several hours long. In general, I approached the interviews as continuously unfolding in nature.

As a local worker in Ouray with many friends around me, data acquisition for this thesis was a constant, sometimes almost unconscious, process. My observation never stopped and I always carried a notebook to jot down ideas and quotes as they came to me. Qualitative methods are flexible by nature and my research plan mimicked that flexibility (Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman 2007, 99).

I was in Ouray for the summer of 2008 researching and working for two months. While there I conducted most of my formal interviews. Like many other researchers of sense of place, I kept two different notebooks: one for interview notes, the other for thoughts, observations, and personal reflections. I did not tape my interviews as I felt a recorder would impede the open,

honest dialog I wanted to have. My interviewees ranged in age from approximately twenty to eighty. To build my snowballs, I decided to follow up on the people suggested by my initial interviewees and therefore to limit my own biases in this regard. I also made sure that the three local groups were evenly represented (i.e. eight born-and-raised locals, eight later-in-lifers, and eight part-timers).

About ninety percent of the names I mention in the following chapters are real; to honor the wishes of a few individuals, their names have been changed. To keep my work truthful, I took notes during the conversations and added detail immediately after. As geographer R. J. Rowley (2009) has suggested, a good way to ensure that such qualitative information is valid is to shore it up with quantitative data whenever possible. Rowley suggests triangulating findings, by only accepting a story as indicative of a population as a whole when three or more individuals have stated the same thing. I took his advice to heart. Still, readers should understand that this is not a hypothesis-testing, positivist study. My philosophical roots instead lie in phenomenology and idealism.

John Van Maanen's *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* provides quality guidance with respect to methodology, the relationship of the fieldworker to the observed, and the style I select to represent my findings. Van Maanen passionately writes of the importance of transparency in one's ethnological work as it is a difficult task to discern the subtleties of cultures.

In the spirit of phenomenology, I did not want to anticipate findings and I did not know what themes would arise from my interviews. From my own experience, however, I have seen the love/hate relationship of local people with tourism and participated in many bonding activities for residents. From sharing a beer with good ol' boys at "woodsies" (mountain

nighttime fire gatherings), to being invited to join the women's dominoes club, I have been given a rare opportunity to "see behind the curtain" in Ouray. Though I know I could never know all there is about local life, I certainly have experienced this place in a deep way. I know, too, that part of my task here is to try to understand Ouray's relationship to other neighboring communities and its natural and cultural isolation. Through discussion of these activities and themes, along with a slew of other tidbits that emerged through interviews, my thesis slowly began to reveal a composite view of Ouray as seen by its locals.

An ongoing theme from each of my interviews was a strong objection to explicitly defining Ouray. All locals—no matter how many years they spent in residence—were adamant against categorizing their community. It was not a ski town, not a Southwestern town, not a resort town, and not a second-home-owners' town. Their collective conviction to perceive and therefore keep Ouray as a place different than all others spoke louder than any other theme in my research. Locals more than anything want their town to remain separate from Telluride, Ridgway, Silverton, or Durango. Therefore, although Ouray is most certainly a place in transition, struggling to find a modern success-story while holding onto its historical identity, a belief that this place should be different, wild, and break the norms is rampant.

I do not want to essentialize Ouray by fixing it in time and succumbing to easy generalization. I prefer to think of it as a continually evolving place with agency over its future. It is neither "good" nor "bad." Although one can easily romanticize Ouray and demonize it as well, places and their people are never that simple. Both ends of the "goodness" spectrum are essentialist traps, and miss the complexity of human life in a place. A researcher always enlists stories to convey place meaning, but strives to select examples carefully. The goal is an open-minded, reflexive approach.

At the risk of essentializing, I argue that Ouray is not only naturally wild, but also socially wild. Beyond the nature of the place and the social relations between people, all three local groups interviewed stated that wildness makes Ouray what it is. A visitor senses a series of uncontrollable, unconventional, rugged feelings almost immediately, and these stay with you after you have built a longer relationship with this place. They, in fact, define the experience of Ouray.

Nominalism is the alternative pitfall to essentialism and a researcher must beware here as well. It would be easy to list traits about Ouray without making any overarching argument at all. I hoped that I would not have to report ambivalence as a dominant view about town, and feel quite lucky that there was a clear essence of this place to report. One could argue that any place is unique and has interesting people, but I hoped to demonstrate more about Ouray. Furthermore, I wanted to avoid the proclamation that you, too, should share in my passion for this place simply because it is different. Sense-of-place in Ouray is much deeper.

Although I will provide an introduction to the physical and historical settings, my goals are more social and current. I want to explore what local people are actually talking about today—whether it be happenings of the past or current issues of place. In this way, my research may be considered folkloric. I say folkloric in a holistic sense of the word, meaning that folklore is more than a simple reflection into the past, but an ongoing conglomeration of stories a cultural group edits through time. This collection of stories becomes not only a way to instruct one another, but also a way to provide context for Ouray as its own sort of place with a particular way of being. With bits of truth and bits of invented tradition, the sense-of-place in Ouray is not a static entity, but it is something modified consciously and unconsciously. It is continually shaped over time and it is subject to individualistic interpretation.

I have done my best to get at the essence of my local interviewees' individualistic interpretations of this place. My interviewees served, in my mind, as little glimpses into the folklore of Ouray today. Ouray is wild. It has always been that way, and wants to continue so more than anything else.

Chapter 3: Wild Nature of Ouray: A Beautifully Rugged Landscape



Figure 3: Fellin Park adjacent to the municipal hot springs pool, photo by author July 2007.

There are many ways one can begin exploring a place. I have chosen to build this story from the ground up. Ouray's wealth has always come from nature, whether through natural resource extraction or ecotourism. Physical geography immediately sets this site apart from other small towns in the area and nationally. Ouray is naturally wild.

Visitors always are struck by the unusual colors of Ouray's mountains (Figures 3 and 4). Many shades of gray come from uplifted Silurian limestone, reds from outcroppings of shales, and purples from Tertiary beds of andesitic breccia and conglomerates. These are all capped by massive, dark lava flows (Rickard 1907, 24). Red Mountain at the south end of town is named

for iron-rich deposits that streak down its slopes. More than one local resident has told me they love singing the “purple mountain’s majesty” portion of “America the Beautiful.” The lyric, they swear, has to refer to their hometown’s colorful peaks.



Figure 4: View of town looking towards the south, photo courtesy of Jeff Burgess 2009.

The San Juan Range, in which the town of Ouray belongs, constitutes the southwestern edge of the Rocky Mountains. These peaks stretch diagonally for seventy-five miles across the southwestern corner of Colorado and are satiated with mineral wealth. The district is known for silver and gold, but much of Ouray’s production came from lead, zinc, and copper (Henry and Mossa 1995, 267).

The city of Ouray sits atop layers of Paleozoic sediments and metamorphic rocks from the Laramide Orogeny. This entire system was then covered by Tertiary volcanic ash and lava

flows. Central-vent volcanoes once characterized the San Juan region. When two of them in the Ouray area collapsed almost as fast as they were formed, their calderas were filled with rapidly cooling igneous materials. The entire region experienced both domal uplift and basin collapse concurrently. In this way, the Ouray area saw both radial and centripetal fracturing (Rosemeyer 2001). The underlying, or basement, layers were fractured too, and then underwent lateral compaction. As they overthrust one another, open fissures appeared that allowed extensive groundwater percolation. The geoscience behind this movement is still debated, but the result for Ouray is natural hot springs and mineral deposition (e.g. Ruf and Erslev 2005, Law 1992). The springs are held sacred for their healing properties by the Utes who once populated the area. Some people still use the waters for therapeutic purposes and nearly all residents and visitors enjoy them recreationally.

Although Ouray first became famous for placer mining of gold and silver in the mid-nineteenth century, attention soon turned to lode-based explorations (Rosemeyer 2001). T. A. Rickard observed in a 1902 journey through the area that ore formed in variable masses at the contacts between rock layers. Minerals were carried in solution to these contacts from below and, upon cooling, precipitated out. Complicating the deposition process, the San Juans also are characterized by unusual sedimentary dikes that protrude through other layers. These dikes were likely implanted by volcanic movements. Clastic sediments, pulled alongside volcanic intrusions, were then cemented by the intense heat and pressure (Rickard 1907). In all these ways, Ouray possesses pockets of mineral wealth unlike any other place in the world.

Gemologists and amateur collectors love conditions in the San Juan Range as much as traditional miners. From pyrite to amethyst, one does not have to look far to find a sparkly stone sticking out of the ground. Geologist Tom Rosemeyer has mapped the various crystalline

outcroppings and found (among others) beds of grossular garnet, amethyst, and prehnite plus milky quartz caves that are among the finest in the world (Rosemeyer 1994, 2001 and Stoufer and Rosemeyer 1989).

Ouray topography is unique as well. Much of the Southern Rockies region consists of elongated anticlinal ridges and deeply eroded synclinal valleys. Ouray, however, occupies a small basin nearly surrounded by mountains reaching to 14,000 feet. So, where the Uncompahgre River cuts a narrow path through the basin at an elevation of 7,700 feet, residents look up to mountains towering a mile above their heads (Figure 5). With only one road through the city, one has the sense of being engulfed by peaks rather than passing through a valley.

The local beauty has impressed many outsiders. Allegedly, the Rocky Mountain National Park was first proposed to be within Ouray's San Juans. However, because so much local land was (and is) owned privately in active and inactive mining claims (approximately 10,000 claims today), the park had to be resited in the Front Range (Smith 2009). Author Ayn Rand was similarly struck with Ouray's natural beauty, and so based the setting of *Atlas Shrugged* on town's layout. The utopian city of Galt's Gulch is Ouray in the 1950s. An annual international festival still honors Ayn Rand, bringing in a distinctive set of world travelers to the petite community. John Wayne too frequented this wild terrain. Filming in the area and socializing locally, he allegedly left his hat at The Outlaw restaurant on Main Street. Honky-tonk piano playing, cowboy-themed décor, and the Duke's hat bring in tourists by the droves.

One would think local people would be accustomed to the views, but all eight of my interviewees who were born and raised in Ouray commented on the stunning beauty. One older man who had traveled to see the Alps because Ouray is often called "The Switzerland of America," came back disappointed: "We're nothing like Switzerland! It wasn't nearly as

pretty!” He went on to say, “. . . and about that Beautification Committee, I don’t know why we have it. We don’t need it!” (Ellis 2008). And the beauty is right in your face. Because the town has only a small grid of streets and then creeps up the mountain slopes in all directions, the views are inescapable (Map 2). In my opinion, you haven’t lived until you’ve seen a triple rainbow across Ouray’s naturally occurring amphitheater (Figures 6, 7, and 8). Spend a week visiting Ouray in August and you certainly will see just that.



Figure 5: The naturally shaped amphitheater, photo by author January 2010.

All twenty-four of my interviewees commented on the connection to the basics in Ouray. One is always working close with nature. Whether it’s snow, mud, or dust, the elements are unavoidable and those who stay in Ouray like this sort of arrangement.



Figure 6: Rainbow over amphitheatre, courtesy of Damion Ziemba July 2010.



Figures 7 and 8: Photos by author, June 2010 (left), August 2010 (right).

Many people speak of the drive into town from either the north or south as Ouray's definitive experience. It's like entering a secret world (Figure 9). Visitors to town are in for a

surprise when they wake up if they arrive to town after dark. Missing the drive into the valley and waking up immersed in it can be astounding. When I interviewed Heidi Albritton, a born-and-raised local and Ouray's county commissioner, she said she always felt homesick for the drives into the valley when she lived other places. Ouray is special, she explained, with its dramatic geographic setting and she described how this fact changes much about daily life. "The shadows fall differently," she said, and the narrow opening above one's head limits the hours of direct sunlight (2008). Mornings begin only when the sun crests the mountains on the east and evening arrives whenever the sun ducks behind the mountains on the west. In compensation for the lack of direct sun, dusk and dawn both are long in Ouray with ambient light softening the landscape. In addition, the early sun setting allows more time to enjoy the spectacular views of the stars at night. With virtually no light pollution in town and the thin atmosphere, the Milky Way is always clearly arrayed across the night sky. Having grown up in Kansas with flat horizons and huge skies, I find it interesting that while Ourayites get a much narrower sliver of sky, their sky is much more intense, brighter, and packed full of stars.

Locals know the winds to be different in Ouray, too. They are nearly constant but come at different directions as they must sweep down and then back up around the curves of the basin (Figure 10). They whip up skirts and umbrellas, agitate porch swings, and sling little bits of rock. However, assuming it's one of Ouray's 285 sunny days of the year, your laundry is dry on the line almost instantaneously.

Ouray typically receives about 140 inches of snow a year, which creates high albedo throughout the winter season. Sun is reflected back at such a rate that sunglasses are a must. The insolation warms roofs, allowing snow and ice pack to slide off gutters and into yards.

Icicles form overnight, too. These slump and point back to home windows looking like loaded guns waiting to be fired. They can easily break through windowpanes (Figures 11 and 12).



Figure 9: South on Highway 550 towards Ouray, photo by author January 2010.

A local recently observed that he believes my home in Ouray to be the only one left in the county with a wooden-shingled roof (Willis 2009). More durable metal coverings can mitigate damage from falling boulders and collapse under snow weight. My annual roof leaks will soon call for a metal replacement, but because of the lack of a hardware store in town, it has so far been easier to mend holes than find a replacement. The tendency to make do in Ouray is strong.



Figure 10: City of Ouray, looking towards the northeast from Weehawken Trail, photo by author July 2007.



Figure 11: Icicles, photo courtesy of Belinda Willis, 2009.



Figure 12: Icicles, photo courtesy of Jeff Burgess 2010.

My interviewees remarked how Ouray's physical isolation simplifies life. All your basic needs are nearby, so close, in fact, that it is often easier to walk:

You don't have to drive everywhere. You need a grocery store? Duckett's is a block away. Mail? A block and a half. Many trailheads are in walking distance and dozens more are within a mile. Parking is never an issue. You don't have the inconveniences of big-city life. You don't lock your door. Going out to dinner is easy and you can walk home from the bar. Summertime is especially easy (Gonzales 2008).

Many locals speak of the importance of climate in their lives. Pam Larson, a former mayor of Ouray, told me that the changes throughout the year in weather and the landscape were what made Ouray special to her (2009). While she and others acknowledged that winters are hard and sometimes dull, they also said that they look forward to the snow and the quiet life it

brings to town (Figure 13). Everything sounds different in the wintertime. Much like the effect of a pillow stuffed in a bass drum, the snow muffles all sounds. Town is crisp, quiet, and blindingly white. Many people, especially business owners, told me that the economically important Ouray summers were draining and they said that sort of energy could not be mustered year-round. The simple life, even if means a little isolation and boredom, is a welcome change for many come wintertime.



Figure 13: Town looking northeast, photo courtesy of Jeff Burgess 2010.

Even though the staples of life can be found right in town, a quest for specific products can be much trickier. One local explained to me how the variety of goods available in town had deteriorated over time.

Prices are high. We have to go thirty-five miles to get a decent deal. We lost our lumberyard—to greed—and now it's condos. You have to go ten miles to get a screw and you have to go thirty-five miles to get a certain size screw . . . maybe I should have said nut and bolt? (Ellis 2008)

This interviewee, and many others, explained that even the drug store was gone now. The grocery is decent and tries to accommodate the various diets of the twenty-first century. Its

increased range of staple goods is a pleasant exception in town, and represents a change from a decade ago (Figure 14). As kids, many of my interviewees now in their twenties remembered how they used to call this store the “food museum.” They talked of playing games to find the items most beyond their expiration dates.



Figure 14: Mainstreet, photo courtesy of Anna Milner 2009.

The list of problems with life in Ouray actually is long, and most stem from its isolation. Many stores close often, early, or even seasonally. Traveling to and from town is tough and quite expensive (and it doesn't help when the signs are incorrect, see Figure 15). The nearest hospital in Montrose is a forty-minute drive in good weather. Propane and other heating costs are often exorbitant. Still, this isolation is double-edged. It provides incredible beauty as I have suggested, and a sense of adventure. An ability to

make it in Ouray in the face of rugged nature provides great satisfaction to its nine hundred residents.



Figure 15: So isolated that even the Colorado Department of Transportation is not familiar with “Quray,” photo courtesy of Brandon Gonzales 2009.

Any visitor to Ouray notices an array of narrow roads that lead up the mountain slopes (Figures 16, 17, and 18). This area is known for jeeping tourism, which has been featured in numerous travel magazines and on television’s Travel Channel (e. g. Phillips 1999, Sharples 2007, Spano 1994). Casual drivers may cringe at treacherous drop-offs along narrow switchbacks, but the presence of six jeeping rental and tour companies speaks for the popularity of such an adrenalin rush.

Beyond their topographic undulations, other aspects of Ouray roads also draw local attention. It is not uncommon, for example, to see signs pleading “Please wipe your feet, there is mag chlor on the streets!” Magnesium chloride has been used as an anti- and deicing agent throughout Colorado since the 1990s, but the state Department of Transportation (CDOT) has more recently started to spray it on the unpaved roads of Ouray to reduce dust (Figure 19). Now

the milky blue substance drips in ditches year-round and has become a highly contested matter. Residents argue that it eats away the paint on their cars and damages roadside electrical equipment. They also worry about health effects. A CDOT study in 2002 concluded that magnesium chloride was much more corrosive than sodium chloride (table salt) under most conditions, but then declared the tests inconclusive. Their inaction frustrates local people.



Figure 16: Jeeping, photo courtesy of Alison Kolowich, 2008.



Figure 17: Jeeping, photo courtesy of Alison Kolowich, 2008.



Figure 18: Road to Yankee Boy Basin, photo by author May 2008.



Figure 19: Truck spraying magnesium chloride, photo by author August 2009.

Avalanches are another threat along Ouray's roadways, most notably south from town, where Main Street (Highway 550) is flanked by steep rock walls. Like most Rocky Mountain towns, Ouray uses a howitzer to preventatively blast away rock and snow with controlled explosions. Wintertime is not the only threatening season, as springtime melt season and late summer monsoon season bring mudslides, rock slides, and lots of debris down these same tracks! Over a hundred known avalanche paths are named and monitored and each carries a tally of deaths. Avalanche sheds (wooden and concrete reinforced structures over roadways) are built to limit such catastrophes, but they are not entirely successful. The East Riverside avalanche path from the tip of Mount Abram, for example, has claimed six lives since 1960 despite precautionary blasts and the presence of a protective shed (Sares and Gleason 2000).

Highway 550 has several unusual features. Mile markers are constructed extra high so as to be seen over snow in winter. More surprising, the road lacks guardrails along sharp drop-offs, some of which measure thousands of feet. Local lore has it that this absence is because the rails give tourists a false sense of security and therefore cause more accidents. A more likely explanation is a lack of proper anchoring sites at such locations. Also, because the roads are narrow, they must be cleared of snow frequently, and without guardrails, this task is much simpler (Figure 20).

Residents often complain of what they call "The Ouray County Windshield." With Main Street being the only road completely paved, rocks often kick up and crack windows. Technically it is illegal to drive with such cracks, but if officials were to start ticketing, all townspeople would find themselves victimized. Ouray windshields are easy to spot in the bigger shopping towns of Montrose and Grand Junction. They are an unavoidable side effect of living

in rugged mountain country. Much like I continue to wear my gravel-destroyed high-heeled shoes, many residents actually display their cracked windshields with pride.



Figure 20: Highway 550, photo courtesy of Allison Kolowich, 2008.

Narrow roadways and sharp curves are familiar territory to Ourayites. Many of these nuances of the landscape of town are informally—though colorfully—named by locals: Upper Potato Patch and Vinegar Hill for two. And visitors from the north are familiar with the sharp turn that carefully traces a cut bank of the Uncompahgre River before entering town. Local's call this “Tuffy’s Corner,” named after a former coroner whose family presence goes back to Ouray’s early days (Gregory 1997, 175). Leo “Tuffy” Flor pulled many cars and bodies out of the river at the sharp bend in this corner and most everyone in town believes that’s why it bears his name. A friend of Tuffy’s, however, told me that Tuffy had confessed that he once tried to get fresh with a date while driving around that corner and when she denied his advance, he lost control of the car. Tuffy himself ended up in the river and thus the corner would forever be known as his. Though the northern route into town is flatter than the southern one it is not without its dangers!

The steep slope of Highway 550 causes much stress for visitors from the south. This is the “Million Dollar Highway,” so named for the cost of its construction early in the twentieth

century. Many people today assert that the name comes instead from the road's "million-dollar" views. Others only half jokingly say the reference is to the cost of brake repairs. The smell of hot brakes is certainly commonplace in Ouray. Some locals claim to like it, saying the odor is that of tourists coming. At any event, brake failure is frequent enough so that it's always a good idea to look both ways twice before crossing a local road.

Alpine glaciers sculpted Ouray's topography, and numerous hanging valleys create spectacular waterfalls at the edges of town. Two of these are big tourist attractions (Box Canyon and Cascade Falls), and many others nestle along hiking trails. Cascade Falls is spectacular. An in-town hike takes a visitor to its base, the last in a series of seven waterfalls. Water from "Lower-Cascade," as it's called, and a smaller local creek (Portland) is channeled through town in two cement flumes (Map 2). These flumes, approximately eight feet across and six feet deep, are open on the top and crossed by many bridges. Water volume in the flumes during summer is usually low, only a couple inches deep, but a layer of slick moss underneath and occasional pieces of exposed rebar (from consistent erosion) create hazards.

No signs at the top of the flumes alert visitors of the dangers or forbid entrance, so people can and do easily gain access. I can attest to this because one of the flumes runs through my front yard. I cannot count how many times I have rescued kids there who have strawberries head-to-toe. They try to descend the channels on wagons, sleds, and popped inner tubes, but learn their lesson. With nothing to grab onto, once you're in the water you are in for a fast journey. The flume height shortens as it approaches the Uncompahgre River and so the bridges overhead get lower and lower to the ground. Failing to duck under a bridge leads to many accidents. The flumes are only one of the many secret dangers of Ouray (Figure 21).



Figure 21: Flume with bridges and a bear using them, photo by author 2007.

The city puts great value on common sense and respects the power of the local natural landscape. An “at-your-own-risk” approach similar to the flumes is taken with hiking trails. Some signs and informational clinics in the area warn of bears, mountain lions, and falling rock, but for the most part the trails lack much fuss about safety and are maintained by volunteer labor. This sort of hands-off tourism appeals to certain people, and they are the ones who choose Ouray over more highly developed resort towns. The area’s charms are simple, straightforward, rugged, and clean.

Ouray is proud of its water, which unlike that in many other mining towns, is clean and safe. A local told me that water is one of the things he most loves about Ouray, saying: “. . . there’s plenty of it, and always will be because we’re at the headwaters” (Ellis 2008). Residents laugh at tourists who buy their water in bottles, for they know the tap variety is purer. A local

group has even published a children's book called "My Water Comes from the San Juan Mountains" to be used as an educational reminder of the importance of clean water ecosystems (Fourment et al. 2009). Ouray once had a bottled water plant, but it went out of business because locals, knowing it was no different than other town water, were not willing to sell it to tourists as something special. Ouray's water varies from acidic to basic depending on where you test, a result of the extremely variable geological conditions, but it always comes out of the tap with such pressure that it fizzes in a glass. So much air is trapped in the water that it looks white like milk until the bubbles dissipate. Even the drinking water is wild in Ouray.

The decreased atmospheric pressure and lack of oxygen at eight thousand feet gives Ouray visitors temporary problems of headache, dizziness, and nausea. Locals, of course, develop an increased red-blood-cell count typical of all high altitude residents to cope with the harsh conditions. Tourists are told to take it easy, drink lots of water, and avoid the hot springs until acclimated. Altitude affects lots of other things in Ouray too. Cooking is quite different, for example. Ingredients vary and water takes longer to boil. Plasma screen televisions will work at altitude, but not without buzzing, a fact many residents discover the hard way. Mylar balloons do not float in the town's light air and so birthday parties must limit themselves to the latex variety. If anything goes wrong in Ouray, altitude is the de facto explanation.

A highland ecosystem adds to Ouray's distinctiveness. Until I lived in Ouray, I had never heard of "watermelon snow" or "snow algae." If high altitude snow survives until summer months then an algae containing red pigment may grow in the ice crystals. If stepped on, such snow will compact, turn red or pink, and smell of watermelon.

As for animals, yes, bears and mountain lions are frequently in town. And yes, sometimes they even break into homes and eat pets. Unfortunately, these creatures are quite

accustomed to people. Deer often do not flinch when approached and regrettably stand their ground to cars on the road. This past year a woman was killed and eaten by a bear she had befriended and fed kibbled dog food by hand. She had been warned many times by authorities about the danger, but she continued to allow deer, elk, and other animals into her home. As the local story goes, authorities found a full bag of Ol' Roy brand dog food beside her body. Locals mourned her passing, but they shook their heads, concurrently understanding her motives of wildlife admiration yet decrying her judgment.

The flora is more peaceful. Aspen leaves on flattened stems quake in the breeze, sounding like a distant crowd in applause. These leaves become bright yellow and orange in the fall, and the tree's white trunks are adorned along trails with carved initials of couples past. Columbines of all shades grow everywhere and hollyhocks tower in alpine meadows. Yankee Boy Basin is famous for its wildflowers and is also home to Twin Falls, site of numerous car commercials and the Coors Beer logo. At mornings in this basin one can watch the rising sun cross over the blooms and turn on floral aromas. While these flowers can be found in all Colorado mountain towns, several other Ouray plants are more exotic. For example, visitors are often struck by the abundance of poppies in town. It's common for tourists to hear that these flowers are present because residents make their own opiates. The story is untrue, but a nugget of fact is buried there. Ouray, like many other mining towns, had Chinese immigrants in the late nineteenth century. Many of these people operated a series of laundries. Historical records assert that the Asians were respected because they provided a necessary service to the predominantly male mining community (Gregory 1996). Off the record, however, it is said that the Chinese provided more than clean clothes. At the height of the mining boom, many men were looking for a good time in town—which shall be discussed in chapter three—and some

found it via Chinese-made opium. Even today in Ouray people still find old vials, pipes, and other related paraphernalia when nineteenth-century buildings are remodeled or demolished (Gregory 1996).

Extensive mining efforts throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century affected all of Ouray's natural realms: soil, water, living organisms, and air quality. Recent research reveals that most of these ecological communities have rebounded successfully, but now new concerns about environmental health have arisen. One issue is wildfire. Scientists have become skeptical of the excessive fire prevention methods employed throughout the West in the late twentieth century, for example, arguing that such a policy leads to hotter-burning, more severe canopy burns than under natural conditions (Donovan and Brown 2007). With regard to the San Juans, "pre-1880 fires occurred during years of severe drought, conditioned by above average moisture conditions in preceding years." In contrast, the twentieth century saw a near complete absence of fires, suggesting "future wildfires may be more widespread and ecologically severe" (Grissino-Mayer et al. 2004). Nature in Ouray therefore has the potential to get much more wild.

In Ouray's version of the Hollywood sign, the southeast corner of town is marked with twenty-foot tall letters spelling "Box Canyon." These letters, erected in 1909, are no longer illuminated, but remain a landmark in Ouray that cannot be missed (Gregory 1984). Once closer to the signage, one may be reminded of Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds," as the decrepit letters are often riddled with nests and perched magpies, crows, and swifts. The harsh conditions of the San Juans produce unusual ornithological populations. Ouray's Box Canyon, for example, is home to black swifts. The birds thrive near this canyon's deeply set, eighty-foot waterfall. The powerful stream here has cut deep through limestone, green dolerite, and quartzite, and the roar from its flow of thousands of gallons per minute is deafening (Gregory 1984). A consistent thick

mist keeps the canyon's dark walls dripping and cold even on the hottest summer day. Here, the elusive black swift nests in small cracks, making its home of damp mud and moss. A narrow suspension bridge above the falls is a good place to spot the birds. Although this species is found elsewhere in the Americas, their picky habitat preferences make study difficult (Hirshman, Gunn and Levad 2007). A pair almost always incubates only one egg and does so over a long period. Fledglings then take an exceptionally long time to leave the nest. Even though many things seem to be working against these swifts, their populations in Box Canyon have increased over the fifty-seven years they have been observed (Hirshman, Gunn and Levad 2007). Locals say that the black swifts are among the many things that somehow have beaten the odds and survived in the rugged San Juans.

Box Canyon's steep walls also have become Ouray's newest tourist attraction. The town is now the "Ice Climbing Capital of the World," and a festival brings hundreds of climbers to town in the previously docile winter (Figure 22). This influx is important for the economy, for unlike nearby mountain communities with ski industries, Ouray traditionally has functioned with only one busy season—summer. Many local residents now have invested heavily to develop this new ice economy. Tops of the canyon walls have been traced by a series of pipes and valves that can be opened and closed as needed to spray water and thereby build thick frozen waterfalls. The mile-long gorge now is able to offer 160 different paths up the walls at varying degrees of difficulty.

An unusual business arrangement has allowed the Ice Park to become an official tourist destination. Local resident and Ouray Hydro Electric proprietor, Eric Jacobsen, purchased the site from a bankrupt utility company at auction and then donated the property to the county for a dollar per year. (Ouray Hydro Electric, incidentally, has been in operation since the 1880s,

making it one of the oldest hydroelectric power plants in the world [Corbell 2009].) Officials began Ice Park construction in 1994 and the first festival was held in 1996. It is run entirely on volunteer labor. True to Ouray tradition, the park has only a simple set of rules: keep your dog on a leash, wear a helmet, and use crampons (metal-spiked shoe attachments) (Eddy 2009). Admittance is free and the park does not rent equipment, provide guides, or offer instruction. However, other local businesses do provide such services.



Figure 22: Ice Park with a climber in the center of the photo, photo courtesy of Jeff Burgess 2010.

Ice climbing has polarized town opinion. Proponents will tell you that this business is the saving grace for Ouray County as it offers an alternative tourist season. Opponents assert that the Ice Park brings in little to no money to most businesses and provides little more than aggravation during an otherwise peaceful snowy season.

Tourism signage and brochures state that enough hydroelectric power is generated in Ouray to power the entire city. However, this energy is contracted to the regional San Miguel Power Association, which then sells it back to local residents. Many people are frustrated with the arrangement, and for them, some hope is on the horizon. In December 2009 Mayor Bob Risch announced a \$30,000 grant from the Colorado Governors Energy Office that will fund a new hydroelectric generator adjacent to the hot springs municipal pool. This will not eliminate the need for other energy sources, but it will take the edge off municipal power expenses. Such progress plus the recent installation of LED streetlamps also helps Ouray residents to feel more ecologically responsible (Corbell 2009 and “Stimulus Money to Fund Ouray Micro-Hydro Project” 2009).

Future relationships between Ouray’s people and their physical environment are uncertain. Although an increased awareness about all things natural exists in the “green” era of the twenty-first century, Ouray as an isolated small town has always had to work directly with the natural landscape. The rugged, unforgiving conditions of the San Juans have never given much leeway to human development and that stark relationship with nature clearly survives even in modern times.

Chapter 4: Wild Social Relations of Ouray: The Cultural Landscape Historically and Today

Fulltime people are flexible and casual. Everybody chooses to live here. No one is transferred to Ouray. That commonality leads to locals being flexible by nature, highly educated, incredibly interesting, and diverse, but we all have one thing in common—we wanted to come here. (Joann Ford, 2008)

People have come to Ouray for various reasons, but its isolation and rugged terrain make for a difficult journey. Only the most dedicated visitors find the town and—as many locals inform me—you have to be crazy to stay. Indigenous peoples arrived first, then miners, and now city dwellers focused on a recreation economy. In all cases it was the mountains themselves that created the allure, whether the intention was ore extraction or summer relaxation. A discussion of social relations in town begins with earlier human presences as precursors to the present day's tourism industry. I believe that Joann Ford's words above apply, in a sense, to all three groups. No one ends up in Ouray by accident, and only a strong will allows one to stay. Furthermore, it is this drive to live despite hardships that has bound people together through the town's history. I argue that, whether we discuss indigenous peoples or miners or current residents, the intrinsic ties to this physical place are what lead to social grouping. The social history of Ouray is often tumultuous, mimicking the unforgiving landscape.

Ouray has created a new cultural history—largely unintentionally—by selecting the social truths it wants and letting others fall away (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, Bowden 1992). Just as levels of local exist in Ouray, so too do levels of truth in the rehearsed cultural history. There's a version of a story that born-and-raised locals know, another that people who move to town hear, and still a third version part-timers hear from locals and tell to tourists. Like a game of telephone, each story changes as it passes from group to group, reflecting social values along

the way. To understand the social story of today, we must talk about the past. Though far from a holistic telling of all of Ouray's cultural history, the stories that follow are bits of the two-hundred-year game of telephone. Where possible I have given a factual framework to underscore the rumors. My goal is partly documentation, but more illumination, to give insight about a people and their construction of their social relations today and through time.

The Utes

Businesses and restaurants in Ouray today often employ carefully selected images and terminology from the area's Native American inhabitants—the Utes. Local knowledge of indigenous culture is limited to tourist-slanted, exaggerated tales, however, which often have little basis in historical truth. The Utes themselves came to southwestern Colorado because of the beautiful terrain and natural hot spring pools. According to their creation myth, the mountainous regions of Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah have been home since the beginning of time. Utes say they have always been “mountain people” and “mountain hunters” (Wroth 2000).

Anthropologists, although granting a Ute presence in the Rockies for several centuries, believe that all the indigenous groups in the area migrated from elsewhere. Historically Native American migration patterns were assumed to be out of the North, but that belief is now being questioned. One theory, for example, emphasizes the Utes' similarities to groups in southeastern California. Though debate is far from concluded, most researchers see compelling connections between the Utes and the other indigenous groups to their southwest. Anthropologist William Wroth (2000) even believes that they share cultural traits with the Aztecs.

Ute cosmology is similar to that of the Aztecs. The sacred world of both peoples contains a medicine wheel centered atop a sacred mountain with the four cardinal directions radiating from this center. Like many other contemporaneous native peoples, Utes align religious beliefs with nature and assign central deity roles to animals associated with the cardinal directions. The two most important ceremonial events throughout the annual clockwise rotation about that center mountain are the Sun and Bear Dances, both of which are still practiced today. William Wroth goes as far as to compare the Utes' mountains to Aztec pyramids (Wroth 2000). For both groups, a high vantage point provides an appropriate observatory and ceremonial center, and the groups' worldviews and seasonally variable lifestyles are constructed about such locations. Furthermore, the Utes have Shoshonean language roots, which is a dialect of the Uto-Aztecan language family that extends far south into Mexico. The Utes maintained physical contact with these southern neighbors well into the nineteenth century.

The name "Ute" is actually a misnomer; these people historically have called themselves "Nuche." Tribal designations were assigned late in their history by European contacts. Prior to this, the Utes categorized themselves and other tribal groups based on ecological adaptations (Wroth 2000, 36). Such classifications were ignored with the arrival of government officials from Spain, Mexico, and later the United States.

The Spanish met the Utes in 1776, first as explorers, next as missionaries, and finally as traders (Rockwell 1999, 15). Utes guided the Spanish through their rugged home terrain and later helped the Europeans to develop extensive trading networks with other native peoples to the south and west. It is said that the Spanish were not particularly interested in Ute land. The trading alliance with the Spanish was mutually beneficial as the Utes gave the Spanish needed local goods and knowledge while receiving horses and other foreign commodities. The Utes

soon gained considerable power as skilled horsemen and warriors. Mexican independence from Spain in 1821 shifted trade relations, and led to pressure on Ute territory from Mexican settlers. Even more drastic change accompanied the United States' victory in the Mexican War of 1846-1848 (Decker 2004, 23-26). Under terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo the Utes came entirely under U. S. control and lost all rights as an independent people.

American settlers began encroaching on Ute territory immediately after 1848, which forced a retaliation of violent, strategic raids. The next year the federal government proclaimed a "friendship" treaty severely limiting relations between Utes and settlers. This treaty, although signed only by one native band, applied to all Ute peoples under United States law. It forced the Indians to recognize the United States as the ultimate authority over their land, boundaries, laws, industries, and lifestyles—all in the name of "protection" (Decker 2004, 26-27). Utes, naturally, responded negatively to such control with a series of rebellions starting in 1854 (Decker 2004, 27). These accelerated after gold was discovered near Denver in 1858. Rebellion, in turn, produced a backlash among mainstream Americans. Savage stereotypes snowballed into oppression and the end of life as the Utes had always known it. In 1868 the Utes were relocated onto two Indian agencies (Rockwell 1999, 23). Among the lands lost was that of Ouray.

The late 1860s were traumatic for the Utes. Bribed and tricked into signing removal treaties, the people were divided into arbitrary groupings and forced onto reservations at the fringes their former territory. The U. S. government renounced prior leadership and appointed Ouray, the head of the Uncompahgre Band, as chief of the entire Ute nation in 1868. Later that same year, a treaty signed by Ouray confined the Utes to the western third of present-day Colorado (Decker 2004, 36-38). Then the U. S. government began strong efforts to "Americanize" these peoples.

In the first consolidation effort, two agencies were built—White River and Los Piños—both within the harsh Uncompahgre country. Climatic limitations of the agencies' locations were great. Extremely cold temperatures necessitated that Utes continue their traditional lifestyle of seasonal migration, but from the Indian agencies' perspective, such movement meant that the Utes were out of control, nomadic rather than settled. The solution was another relocation. Chief Ouray and his band at the Los Piños Agency were moved to a fertile valley site, near present-day Montrose (Rockwell 1999, 23). This area was familiar territory and, for the time being, the relocation seemed promising. The cooperative Chief Ouray and his wife Chipeta were given 400-acre ranch near the agency site plus a fully furnished adobe home (Rockwell 1999, 24).

U. S. law forbade white settlers and prospectors to pass through agency territory, but since violations were common, the federal government acted again (Rockwell 1999, 211). In 1873 Felix Brunot negotiated the so-called "Brunot Agreement" with Chief Ouray. Brunot agreed to pay Ouray a "salary" of one thousand dollars annually so long as he was chief, and in turn, the Utes were to sell land with active mining potential and allow seasonal passage of miners through their territory (Wroth 2000, 76). It should be noted, however, that Ouray specified that, if any sacred hot springs were found on the ceded land, they would belong to the Utes. Because of this provision, a narrow four-mile strip of land north of the modern city of Ouray was returned to the Utes (Smith 2003, 6).

In 1879, the death of an Indian agent by Ute hands gave gold-hungry settlers the excuse they needed for further removal (Rockwell 1999, 27). The Utes, of course, were reluctant to leave, but as more and more mineral wealth was discovered in the Uncompahgre country, their fate was sealed. After several delays, they were relocated to a reservation in northeastern Utah in

1881. Chief Ouray died earlier that same year (Rockwell 1999, 31). Today the Utes are organized into three separate nations: the Northern Utes (of the Uinta-Ouray Reservation in Utah), the Southern Utes (of southern Colorado along the New Mexico border), and the Ute Mountain Utes (of a small reservation in southwestern Colorado, northern New Mexico, and southeastern Utah).

As discussed above, Ouray was a polarizing figure. His actions as tribal chief alienated many followers who believed he was too involved with white men and not entirely loyal to the Utes. There is some evidence, however, that he was misunderstood. Like many indigenous leaders, he fell victim to chicanery and was placed in a no-win situation when appointed to a controversial leadership position. In his old age, for example, he was quoted as follows:

We do not want to sell a foot of our land—that is the opinion of all. The Government is obligated by its treaty to take care of our people, and that is all we want. For some time we have seen the whites coming in on our lands; we have not done anything ourselves, but have waited for the Government to fulfill its treaty. (cited in Wroth 2000, 75)

Ouray was born near Taos, New Mexico, and raised in a Mexican-style home instead of a typical, nomadic Ute household. His father was a tribal. Because he was raised in a nontraditional Ute home, it is said that this experience explains his negotiation abilities with outside groups (Houston 2005, 8). Many researchers go so far as to question Chief Ouray's ancestry as a full-blooded Ute. In particular, much debate centers around Ouray's connection to the Apaches. For example, local historian P. David Smith claims Ouray's father to have been Apache (1986, 43) while yet another researcher says it was his mother that brought the Apache heritage (Rathmell 1976, 45). This discrepancy added to Ouray's polarizing reputation among the Utes. According to stories told by elders, Ouray was a widower and had a young son before his days as tribal chief. His son was captured and raised by the Arapahos in northern Colorado. Felix Brunot, the American negotiator, supposedly promised Ouray he would find and return this

son if Ouray signed the agreement. Whether Brunot actually made such a promise or found Ouray's son is the subject of much debate (Wroth 2000: 16-17). No account of the story is found in official government records.

Chief Ouray lived at his adobe home near Montrose through his adult years and stories still circulate today about his associations with prospectors passing through. The most famous concerns the visit of Alfred Packer and his doomed party in 1874. It is said that Ouray allowed the group to lodge with them and urged him to stay until the spring. Packer, as the story goes, insisted that they would be fine to continue on south into the San Juans. It goes without saying that he should have listened to a little indigenous knowledge.

The city of Ouray was established shortly after silver discoveries in 1875. Ute interaction with the new white settlers was said to be friendly at first. Before the relocation to Utah, Utes and Ouray residents socialized frequently, even staging friendly horse races with Navajo blankets as prizes. Chief Ouray himself is said to have enjoyed the city's scenery and its mineral hot springs, and several white residents valued their opportunity to gain indigenous knowledge (Rockwell 1999, 215).

In the early twentieth century, Utes were pushed towards assimilation. They were encouraged to farm, to dress in nontraditional attire, to speak only English, and to attend white schools. Life improved somewhat in the 1930s with the establishment of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 (Wroth 2000, 81). The two Ute subgroups created earlier by the U. S. government were then allowed to approve their own constitutions and to re-establish tribal governments in 1940 (Wroth 2000, 81). These changes brought back a measure of tribal sovereignty. They were able to negotiate as a tribal council and thus better equipped to handle future struggles and to rehabilitate their standard of living.

The 1940s and 1950s brought economic expansion to the Utes via the exploration of natural resources. Negative stereotypes slowly faded and the general public began to recognize their authority on energy development. Oil and gas revenue from tribal lands have enabled considerable economic and social gains in recent decades (Wroth 2000:83).

As for the area in and around Ouray, the new extraction economy transformed the local cultural landscape from one resembling Aztec Mexico into that of an Anglo mining town. The real history of the Utes was forgotten, or more accurately, reconceptualized to fit better with the stereotypes of the American West. The Ute story given under the “History” tab of Ouray’s town website, for example, contains only echoes of the story I have outlined above. It mentions the concept of sacred ground and states that the Utes seasonally occupied the basin. The website also mentions the Utes’ work as tour guides and traders for the Spanish in the early days of European contact. Then, however, the story jumps directly to the mining boom. It leaves out all of the trials and tribulations the Utes and romanticizes Chief Ouray’s historical presence (Figure 23).



Figure 23: Ouray and Chipeta, his second wife (Ouray Chamber Resort Association 2008).

The entire story of Chief Ouray’s life has been cleverly edited. It is rare to find any mention of Ouray’s likely mixed ancestry, the loss of his first wife and son, or the white-sympathizing stigma placed upon him by many Utes. Once his signature is placed on the treaty

ceding rights to the Ouray town basin, he disappears. Similarly, narrative about Utes in general is limited to the healing properties they believed the hot springs held and the sacredness of the mountains surrounding the town. It is no coincidence that these two items are the things that bring tourism to Ouray. Stories about the bloody raids on behalf of the Utes or the wars they fought against surrounding native groups once they acquired the horse are ignored.

Today, the most visible sign of Ute culture in town is a bronze bust of Chief Ouray in front of the historical museum. It is accompanied only by a very brief historical plaque, however, and its site is off Main Street and therefore unseen by most visitors (Figure 24). Census data show no indigenous presence. Still, the distorted telling of native history is inexcusable and use of Ute stories and imagery purely for tourism profit is damaging to Ute culture. The biggest disservice, I believe, is portraying them as an inert, almost lifeless force that has simply been acted upon. This myth has superseded that of the barbaric savage, but is hardly an improvement. To discuss the Ute peoples as if they are frozen in time is no discussion at all.



Figure 24: Chief Ouray monument, photo by author August 2010.

The Mining Town

The approach taken by the city of Ouray regarding mining history is drastically different from that of the indigenous presence. While the mining era, too, has been romanticized to fit

stereotypical ideals, its story contains a more concrete basis in truth. This difference is partly because mining is a much more recent memory and its legacy is far from finished. Many of the original mining families are still present in Ouray and a large number of people continue to work in a handful of active mines. However, the ongoing renewal and selectivity of mining stories says much about the town's central value system.

After the conclusion of the Civil War, the discovery of silver and gold lodes and placers in the Colorado Rockies quickly moved from the Front Range and central portion of the state to the more remote San Juans. The first notices of silver and gold in Ouray came in 1875, and by 1876, a mining camp had been incorporated (Bennett 2005, 24). Miners poured in by the thousands, and a handful of individuals found real wealth.

Discoveries of gold and silver were concentrated in pockets on the fringes of the Ouray basin. Most prospectors came from the south in Silverton and followed a chain of elusive ore veins over Red Mountain Pass and down into the Uncompahgre watershed. Numerous small mining communities sprung up that each contained more people than Ouray has today. Ironton, Ash, Portland and so on—these small communities now exist in the minds of residents only as names of hiking trails or good, flat places on which to camp or party. Transportation between these ephemeral communities was trying at best, even though they were a mere mile or so from Ouray and the main valley. Wealth was there, but the only way to get it out was by pack mules and burros. Social exchanges were nearly impossible.

The extraordinary expense of road construction in the far southwestern corner of the new Territory of Colorado was compounded by a near absence of public funds. The solution for the San Juans was toll roads, an idea that had met with some success in other parts of Colorado in the 1860s and 1870s (Smith 2009, 63). The instigator was an unlikely character named Otto

Mears. Mears, often called the “Pathfinder of the San Juans,” was an uneducated, Russian immigrant who had been orphaned at eleven and served in the U. S. Army under Kit Carson. Mears became an army baker and eventually took up selling excess flour for profit. He then gave up military life to build flour mills and grow wheat, and came to the San Juans in search of tillable land. There, seeing a need for roads, he found his life’s true calling. One toll road led to another with money enough for complimentary businesses such as selling burros, opening general stores, and investing in mines (Smith 2009, 69-70).

In 1877, Mears purchased several unfinished roads in and near Ouray, completed a connection to settlements to the north, and then collected a small fortune at a tollgate near the modern-day hot springs pool (Smith 2009, 74). After this construction, he was contracted to build a new road from Ouray to the south, a feat that had been met with failure time and time again. The existing path was barely wide enough for a single wagon, open only for limited seasonal passage, and under the constant threat of falling rock. He found success there too, and after the work was complete, mining districts at the north end of town (known as Gold Hill) were connected to the mines of the south (Red Mountain Pass). Mears not only had integrated mining efforts at the local level, but had also connected Ouray to the rest of Colorado.

The wagon road built by Mears, now known as the Million Dollar Highway, remains the town’s lifeline. The tolls have disappeared, but as tourists pay entrance fees at the municipal hot springs pool atop Mears’ old tollgate and business owners watch travelers come down off of the Million Dollar Highway to spend money in town, one cannot help but notice the continuing importance of these entry points at the town’s north and south ends.

Mining in Ouray was never a picturesque, strike-it-rich-single-handedly sort of enterprise. Rather, huge investments were needed to drill far into the mountainsides to extract

the wealth. Tom Walsh was the most famous local success story, an Irish immigrant who made a fortune at the Camp Bird Mine (McLean 1981). As an expression of his great wealth, Walsh purchased the Hope Diamond for his daughter's wedding (Stewart 2007). The Hope Diamond story is told often in Ouray, but it is exceptional. The majority of local mining ties both then and now are more humble. Local lore also says that the only people who historically made money on the mines were the owners, suppliers, prostitutes, and bartenders.

As infamous newspaperman David Frakes Day, editor of Ouray's *Solid Muldoon*, proclaimed in 1884: "If gambling and other species of vice are harbingers of booms, Ouray will certainly enjoy a full grown one this summer" (quoted in Smith 2010, 87). Day had moved to Colorado from Ohio after serving in the Civil War at the Battle of Vicksburg. He was far from shy about his political views and made Ouray's unusually named newspaper Colorado's leading Democratic news source in the 1880s. Taking on mine owners, other towns, and local shenanigans, no one was safe from Day's pen. With a proud collection of lawsuits (boasting twenty-five at one time) and a good-natured exchange of views with his Republican counterpart Eugene Field of the *Denver Tribune*, he brought attention to the Western Slope at the national scale. Because of his boomtown location, Day was never short on subject matter. The mines attracted a young, virile population and with it a rapidly developing entertainment industry.

Ouray was an exhilarating place in the 1880s. Although the Denver and Rio Grande railroad did not arrive to Ouray, smaller trains operated earlier in the decade, including one out to Salida daily. David Day was one of many who thought the trains would help more than the mines: "Ouray's Hot Springs now attracts visitors from all the neighboring camps and with a railroad our village will become a popular resort for tourists and health seekers. Poor Silverton" (quoted in Smith 2010, 86).

The town possessed several dance halls and vaudevillian shows. It also had an active red-light district and self-policed saloons of all shapes and sizes. The prostitution area ran along Second Street (one block west of Main) between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, with a few other such establishments sprinkled elsewhere. Each “parlor house” had its own girls and regular clientele. The most legendary of these houses were owned and operated by the Vanoli family.

John and Domenicio (Domenick) Vanoli came to Ouray from Italy in the 1880s (Gregory 1998, 12). John purchased a large portion of the existing red-light district and emboldened its operation. Reports of drunken prostitutes at midday on Main Street began to appear and gun-toting patrons transformed themselves into criminals. In 1887, a local fiddler became distraught by the disinterest of his favorite girl and tracked her to a boarding house. There he punched through the glass, shot her, and was caught literally red-handed with his arm stuck in the windowpane (Gregory 1998, 15).

In 1888, John Vanoli shot and killed a patron in his dance hall who had become involved in a fight. The next morning, Vanoli supposedly walked all over town trying to give himself up, but no one would arrest him. News of the shooting eventually forced the hand of authorities, but a petition soon released the prisoner from his two-year sentence. It is said that townspeople missed Vanoli’s presence and that the victim had deserved to die (Gregory 1998, 20).

John Vanoli’s growing business success in town was met with an equal sum of trouble. When he got in over his head, he would simply sign the properties over to his brother Domenick and await a pardon. In 1895, however, when John was again convicted of shooting a patron the process to set him free took longer. This suggests a shift in attitudes towards dance halls and general lawlessness in town. John Vanoli died in late 1895 and rumors about this still circulate. Was it from a heart attack, suicide, or complications from venereal disease (Gregory 1998, 42)?

The social change observed in Ouray during the 1890s coincide with the onset of the Silver Panic of 1893, an economic depression that arose because of a silver-flooded market, bad banking deals, and overzealous construction of railroads. As morale in the mining business fell, petitions circulated to close the dance halls. This finally happened in 1902 (Gregory 1998, 49). Soon, slot machines were outlawed, open gambling regulated, and curfews implemented. Colorado's Prohibition Law of 1916 officially closed the remaining brothels and saloons in town, but many stories suggest that at least some of these now-illegal activities simply moved further into confidentiality.

Local lore from the mining heyday in Ouray ranges from opium in the Chinese laundries to tunnels for prostitutes under the streets. Bootlegging, which became common during the prohibition years, is another popular theme and reminiscences of that time are still on the landscape today. Locals tell stories about drinking homemade liquor from carved fruit. They say a person could bring a hollow watermelon to certain backdoors in town, get it filled, and then repair to the town's appropriately named Vinegar Hill for an evening of socializing. Authorities supposedly chuckled at the shells of fruit strewn around town the next morning.

Some "10,000 shafts, tunnels and prospect holes within a ten mile radius of Ouray" serve as reminders of the mining past in Ouray (Bennett 2005, 23). Today, miners still have a large local presence, even though most of these people also work in construction or some other field. A certain romance still accompanies their job title. As Aaron Calhoon lamented when interviewed about his familial mining ties:

My grandpa, Dave Calhoon, he was a miner, and that's what I wanted to be. I was twelve when I first went into a mine. You're supposed to be eighteen. I loved it. You're breaking rock, and you're in new ground every day. You never know what you're going to find . . . Part of me wishes I was born earlier, so I could have been there for the boom (quoted in Arlen 2002).

Calhoon's dedication to his field is quite common among Ouraynians. The town hosts an annual Highgraders Holiday and young girls say half-jokingly "Nothing's finer than a dirty old miner." Natalie Ricks, a born-and-raised local, explained to me, "It's much more accepted here to be with an older guy, like a miner. Plus, the boys our age feel more like brothers than potential dates. The miners mostly had to work young and don't have much education sometimes, so they are at your maturity level." The choice of older miners for mates goes beyond this rationalization, though. Mine tours, memorabilia, and stories around town are all indicators that miners are and have always been an idealized segment of the local population.

Current Social Issues

Comments about miners as potential partners leads to a more general theme in Ouray's social relations today—a limited dating pool. A discussion of dating troubles was one of the few things all of my interviews had in common. From dating outside your age bracket to discussions of experimentation with homosexuality and swinging, locals in Ouray have been forced by circumstance to adopt a more open-minded approach to dating.

With a mere nine hundred residents, gossip is everywhere. Many locals lament the lack of privacy. I was once chatting in line at the grocery with a friend when the checker informed me I didn't need to buy peanut butter because my visitors in town had already bought some earlier that day. But, groceries are just the tip of the iceberg. Such intimacy can be both a nuisance and a godsend depending on the situation. Bonnie Hopkins, a part-timer, and I discussed the prevalence of people leaving town in the middle of the night simply because the smallness of the place suddenly got to them (2008). We each listed about half a dozen people we had known who literally couldn't take it anymore and left without a word.

Born-and-raised Heidi Albritton noted the commonality of divorce for new couples in Ouray. She described how many such pairs, sometimes after a destination wedding in the mountains, come to stay in this picturesque remote setting. Idealistic visions of small-town life are in their minds, something perhaps resembling “The Andy Griffith Show.” Soon, however, the couples find that local life is much more like the trials and tribulations of television’s “Northern Exposure.” Albritton explained that she knew of many couples who had grand ideas for a winter alone in a cabin that were quickly shattered with the realization that they simply could not stand one another or the isolated community in which they had chosen to live.

It takes a certain type of personality to tolerate such closeness. For me, I look forward to the summer months of small-town life, even though it’s easy to tire of daily updates on who may be pregnant or who was late to work. I focus more on the general warmth of it all. I once got a call from my workplace on a day off because I had received a personal package. The UPS man apparently did not want to drive up the steep Fifth Avenue to my house, and having remembered my name from signing for shipments at work, thought it would be easier to just deliver the package there. Even though this driver was new, he caught on quickly. His daily route consisted of a handful of very small towns and he knew no one would object if he broke the rules here and there.

If locals are in any sort of need, the town jumps right in. With isolation comes camaraderie. If someone is seriously ill or injured, benefits are often staged to help with medical expenses. Trading services and bartering are also common. Locals Matt and Jackie Genuit (a born-and-raised local and later-in-lifer, respectively), told me about some of the other unspoken rules of business (2008). They described how they would never switch to the town’s newer bank because of the assistance the older bank had given Matt’s parents in the early days of their

business. We also talked about the popularity of running “tabs” at local businesses and unusual trades for goods and services. A business owner may pay a worker in merchandise instead of money, or the bakery may trade bread for stuffed animals with the toy storeowner. It’s simply an acceptable part of life in Ouray and a necessary adaptation to an erratic and uncertain tourist economy.

Many memorable characters of modern Ouray were mentioned over and over in my interviews. Most frequently talked about was Cass Stanislawski. Though Cass has since retired and his pharmacy business is under new ownership, many locals depended on him for all their medical needs. “Apteka Pharmacy” and “Cass” were one and the same for the last four decades, though the pharmacy itself goes back (under the name Busy Corner Drug Store) many more decades (Gregory 1997). Cass, proudly of Polish decent, changed the name to Apteka, from the Greek word for apothecary. In Ouray, “Apteka”, however, represents a name whose incorrect pronunciation sets the tourists apart from locals. The adjacent lots south on Main Street were purchased by Cass and his wife in 1972. The Hess Building, as it has been known in Ouray since 1893, was marked in a stone carving bearing the Hess name (Gregory 1997). Cass, allegedly wouldn’t stand for another family’s legacy atop his building and promptly had it blasted away and replaced with “Stanislawski.” Cass is a Ouraynian if there’s ever been one: a man of commonsense combined with a special flare that sets him apart even in this idiosyncratic community. His personality was obvious even in the pharmacy building itself. It had one entryway but then was divided into two essentially separate (but equally dusty) stores. One half pharmacy and the other a liquor store—Cass could indeed “fix you up.”

When a friend of mine broke her tailbone at work, she wanted to go to the hospital. She was told that was silly. “Hospital? Why?! Just go see Cass. He’ll fix you up.” Locals

snickered at my friend for making the hour drive to the hospital in Montrose, but she came back to Ouray with a prescription for Cass to fill. “Well here’s the prescription the doctor ordered for you,” said Cass in his unusual voice. “But if you ask me, you’re going to want some of this,” handing her an unmarked bottle. “Don’t take more than one of those in a day, and if the pain gets really bad, you should put two drops of this into a cup of tea.” As my friend reluctantly accepted the brown bottle with a suspiciously sticky eyedropper lid, Cass pecked away at his old turn-of-the-century cash register and said simply: “Here’s your official bill, but no charge for that other one.”

Cass regularly sat on the windowsill outside of his business to read his paper. When potential tourist customers came by, he often would claim that the owner wasn’t there. Sometimes he would ad-lib, saying things like “That guy’s a drunk. He never shows up.” While Cass sometimes might not sell anything to you if he didn’t feel like it, he also could be extremely generous. Rumor has it that he would pick stories out of the newspaper and send anonymous donations through the mail to people in need. For every negative you may hear about Cass there are a hundred positives. In the old days, the pharmacist of a small town doubled as a doctor, and Cass held that mentality until he retired.

Today you can still hear stories about how Cass was notoriously easygoing with prescriptions and alcohol sales, much to the excitement of young people. If Cass liked you, then he’d set you straight. The story goes that when state officials asked him to pick out fraudulent pieces of identification in a test to renew his liquor licensure, he blew it off and exclaimed, “Eh, I’d serve all those little [expletive].” I like to think Cass’ actions as the modern-day version of filling a watermelon with homemade liquor.

Much like the cops of the mining days refusing to arrest prostitutes or John Vanoli, my interviewees observed that the Ouray police force still lacks transparency. Like in other small towns, the good-old-boy network is a pervasive force and the city only has a handful of police officers, all of whom every local knows by first name. When locals want to party they sometimes ask around to find out which cop is on duty; the night's entertainment hinges on the officer's personality. More generally, it's widely known that police officers in Ouray go home to sleep in the wee hours of the night. So, unless someone calls in a disturbance to the dispatch, a party can get fairly loud. Still, limits exist. While there may not be an official officer always on duty, the town polices itself and notices when something is seriously out of sorts.

Ouraynians are no strangers to bears or other natural intruders to their homes. As a result, many households have a gun. The people of this town are strong individualists who stick together. Those who can make it year-round in Ouray have few things they fear. Guns provide safety and sport. There's also such a demand for adventure gear that an outdoor supply store does a nice business carrying everything from toddler hiking gear to serious rock climbing equipment. Locals are almost always physically fit and many can list multiple "fourteeners" (14,000-foot mountains) they've conquered.

I once was walking my dog with a friend on Main Street when we noticed a parked car with an engine fire. The owner was frantically trying to extinguish the blaze, but could not find any water as it was after businesses had closed. I called the fire department (run by local volunteers) while my friend ran to the bar for water in pitchers. While the car owner and I waited, we watched the fire truck come down to Main Street and turn the wrong direction headed out of town. Luckily my friend made it back with bar water and more local help in time to save the car. I don't mean to imply by this story that the fire department in Ouray is incompetent—

they are usually quite responsive and helpful. The moral instead is that locals help one another and tend to operate outside of normal emergency protocols.

Several years ago a woman with dementia visiting town with her husband tragically went missing. Ouray Mountain Rescue (also volunteer operated) immediately went into full swing, hiking all through town and the backcountry. The Ouray police put a net in the river to search for the body. As the story goes, this net caught a detached and mossy human arm. All atwitter with the evidence of a possible new crime, the officers sent the arm to Denver's crime lab for analysis. The excitement ended quickly, however, when the results came back that the arm was a prosthetic. The accuracy of this story cannot be confirmed, but its presence in local lore says a lot about the perceptions of law enforcement in Ouray.

In the late 1990s the Ouray Sheriff's Department found itself deep in legal trouble. A deputy sheriff, his daughters, and several other locals were involved in a methamphetamine ring, and the sheriff himself was caught processing illegal sawed-off shotguns (Crowder 1999 and Simpson and Lofholm 1999). These issues plus others of embezzlement and drug-trafficking led to near a complete staff overturn. The stigma, of course, remains, sometimes in the form of jokes. Because everyday crime is so rare in Ouray, many of my interviewees noted that, if you are a local law enforcement officer, you have no experience handling crimes.

While some people find small-town Ouray limiting for career advancement or work experience, many more find the town an easy place to get involved. As later-in-lifer Jennifer Loshaw described to me, "There's no other place in the world where I could be the president of the Chamber Resort Association!" (2008). Many born-and-raised locals told me about similar opportunities they would not have had in a bigger city. Children, for example, can explore a wide variety of sports and even radio work (station KURA) at the town's school without the

competition that exists at bigger institutions. Former mayor Pam Larson told me it is the friendliness of town and the local willingness to help that sets Ouray apart from other communities its size. She described lots of ways in which locals are involved with community activities and how one has a good chance to make a real difference there. Larson explained that communication is easy in Ouray and that the word easily gets out for any town need or activity. “The whole town is your neighborhood,” she said. “You need to think in those terms and life becomes easy here” (2009).

Communication was particularly easy in Ouray before the onslaught of cellular phones. A local needed only to memorize four digits to reach another resident as all phone numbers began with “325.” Many locals would make up four-lettered words that corresponded with their digits to help others remember how to reach them.

Life is slower in Ouray. Many part-timers told me that they expected to come to Ouray for a short visit, but then stumbled into a job and stayed for a season. According to Liz Ayers: “It’s sort of like a trap. I never thought I’d be here every summer, but here I am doing the same thing I’ve done every summer for years now” (2008). Many mentioned the analogy of Ouray to the portal-in-time staple of science fiction. “Not only does time move more slowly,” said Adam Clements, a part-timer, “But it’s like we’re back in time as well” (2008). A lifetime local added that: “It’s the slow pace here that binds us together. There’s no other choice. Traffic is always good, even though I swear at it in the summer. Like, someone got my spot today and oh, I was mad! There are people who like NASCAR, you know? And, those people are not here! We like life simple and slow” (Ellis 2008).

If you stay in Ouray County for longer than a short visit and actually contemplate living here, you will grow accustomed to waking up every day to breathtaking views of granite peaks and sandstone cliffs towering above you, sheltering your spirit. And you will find yourself becoming an observer also of the other people

who live here . . . I thought to myself, “These people in Ouray really *like* one another.” (Paulson 2007)

Because Ouray often seems to exist in its own world, under its own set of rules, it is often viewed as a safe haven for individuals who would have otherwise been outcasts. Interviewees mentioned characters like the man who perpetually carried Walmart bags and the woman who ate at the deli daily but kept her wallet under her skirt, making a scene as she paid. The important issue is not documenting strange characters, however, but the fact that they are allowed to stay. Interviewees spoke of the willingness for residents to look past superficial faults, perhaps because they themselves carry social baggage. Many locals spoke of the tendency for people to come to Ouray to escape some sort of prior life. Be it a bad break-up or old drug habit, it is easy to reinvent yourself in Ouray. This trend has led to many rumors about the town being a frequent placement site for individuals in the federal government’s Witness Protection Program.

Brandon Gonzales told me about the broad array of people found in Ouray. “We’ve got artists, town drunks, and wife-beaters. There are police officers, bar owners, a baker, and engineers. It’s not like a strange demographic. It’s not like Telluride with lots of outliers—not a ton of money.” Gonzales went on to point out, though, that “the way life is in this town makes you different” (2008). He was referring most to the isolation. As Bonnie Hopkins explained, “The isolation can change you or sometimes that’s exactly what people want when they come here. Sometimes you just want to be left alone. If you want to be alone, then town will let you. Although, they’ll talk poorly about you behind your back to no end, probably, but they won’t mess with you!” (2008).

The hands-off approach that locals take with one another allows for a wide range of individuality; it also likely encourages drug and alcohol abuse. Both of these addictions were

addressed frequently in my interviews. Perhaps the most startling observation on this subject is a lack of concern. Many locals do not view abuse as a problem at all, so long as it is contained locally. Bending the rules is more acceptable in Ouray, especially if you have lived in town for a long time.

When I asked my interviewees “Who is local in Ouray?” I was expecting explanations of what a local was in general. However, seven of my eight born-and-raised interviewees and many more people from other categories simply answered: “Davey.” I’ve changed his name here as we didn’t explicitly speak about this research project, but locals will certainly know to whom I’m referring. Davey is a local whose roots go back to the early mining days. His family tree extends throughout all facets of town today, but Davey typifies the town persona. Even if you’ve lived in town for years and seen Davey daily, it’s still likely that you’ve never spoken with him. Many of my interviewees elaborated on their local descriptions by saying that a person becomes a local when Davey speaks to you and calls you his catch-all address: “Pard.” Davey, in fact, is so well known for calling everyone Pard that his grandson refers to him as “Pa-Pard” instead of grandpa or papa. By this definition of local, I barely qualify. My discussions with Davey have been limited to his main area of expertise outside his niche in the construction business: beer. Davey told me—in our one and only conversation—that he had learned over the years that the best way to avoid hangovers was to drink only out of bottles. Life advice from the true Ouraynian: “Don’t drink from taps.”

There’s nothing like cheap, domestic beer (bottled, of course) to bring people together in Ouray. Ethnographer José Limón writes of the importance of food and drink in bringing people together. In Limón’s study of Mexican-American South Texas, the meat cookouts represent not only a fun time, but also are a settling for the development of social structure and meaning.

Food, Limón says, is an equalizing force, leveling the field for all those involved (Limón 1994: 137). Sharing a beer after a long day's work can give a person more local credibility than years of local residence. It is in these simple social settings that trust and familiarity are formed, but also it's there that meanings are attributed to place.

Ouray has a clear set of local "experts" and most of them are one-named characters. This thesis names a handful of the most prominent people. From Cass to Davey to Tuffy these one-named folks are arguably more representative of town than elected officials. For each subset of Ouray's locals there is at least one one-named representative character we all know. While the voices of Ouray's handful of published authors certainly carry beyond the limits of town, the voices of the one-named characters penetrate much deeper into the local landscape. To know the town is to know these voices and making their acquaintance often takes perseverance.

All my interviewees said you must "pay your dues" to be accepted in town. The process of becoming local is not necessarily difficult, they continue, but you must give it time and allow the town to operate as it always has. Although superficial friendliness and excitement over new town arrivals certainly exists, this is accompanied by a reluctance to let new people into the old social network. As Jackie Genuit described to me: "Locals are very quick to judge solely based on local loyalty. Out of pride and a protective nature, the town reacts to keep things as they've always been" (2008).

Sandra Boles, a later-in-lifer, said in 2008:

People don't move here to be socially integrated. They will do it, but it's not why they move. There are lots of independent thinkers, not necessarily liberal. It's mostly conservative, but people think for themselves and act accordingly. Like people refuse to put their dogs on leashes. They are strong, independent, don't want to join in on new things. Some people come to be healed from some old wound, while others come to coast through life. All in all there is a lot of support, though, and people aren't so intimidating. We're all stuck here together.

As discussed above, Ouray relies heavily upon the summer months for its annual income. Because of this, local people work much harder than average at this time, frequently having multiple jobs in a day. Seasonal workers, like myself, are a godsend for the restaurant businesses and retail shops. Again harkening back to the nineteenth-century miners looking for relaxation, the work ethic of modern Ouray leads to a pressing need to let loose.

Partly because of isolation and partly because of the short season, there is an almost instant melding of the working community. It is a given that new people will come to Ouray each summer and that we'll all get to know them quickly and accept them into the group. Whether local or seasonal, young or old, everyone hangs out together. Though one can buy drinks at restaurants and at a small brewery, only one proper bar exists in Ouray and a typical night's activity begins there, the Silver Eagle. Known to locals as "The Dirty Bird," this is the only bar in the county that allows smoking as they were exempt from the ban because of high cigarette sales. The art on the walls consists of sarcastic signs insulting customers, a six-foot painting of Ouray with a thick layer of nicotine obscuring the view, old bits of mining equipment, and a stuffed squirrel with a beer bottle and an American flag (Figures 25 and 26). The owner likes to keep things simple and implements rules that are strange to visitors. He only will allow tabs for people he's known for years, accepts no credit cards or checks, and will promptly kick you out for using a cellular phone. He is particularly contemptuous of wintertime tourists and he has been known to put a sign on the door: "No Ice Climbers." He sometimes locks the door once the locals have come in and pretends to be closed. The Silver Eagle is definitely a locals' bar.

While tourists do come into the Silver Eagle and socialize with locals in town, the true local experience is an exclusive matter. It's not uncommon for the Dirty Bird to fill up in the

summer with a mix of restaurant workers and tourists they have served that day, but this is only true in the summertime. Winter tourists are met with mixed local sentiment in Ouray. Some of my interviewees regarded the secondary-season tourists as lifesavers for town, while others rolled their eyes much like the owner of the Silver Eagle:

We've always been known as outgoing and friendly people. Every place has two or three characters that we don't like, but mostly I think we're friendly to strangers. That's changing a little, I guess. Tourists are sometimes given dirty looks. But I think that's still rare. We put on a face for tourists and kind of like having new people all the time. That's just what I think though. I bet newcomers will say we locals are stubborn and hard to get along with! I don't even want to know what the tourists say! (Ellis 2008)

Ouray's most common donor state for tourists is Texas. These people make summer in Ouray possible as it is today, but their presence also invokes some animosity. I've seen several local cars with the bumper sticker: "If God wanted Texans to ski, he would have given them snow!" (But the clever retort (also via bumper sticker) is: "If God wanted Coloradoans to ski, he would have given them money!")

My young interviewees all described a similar chain of social events for a summer evening. After restaurants close, they gather at the Eagle. From there they pile into vehicles and head "up the mountain." Many spots up jeep roads are ideal for bonfires and drinking. Locals call these nighttime get-togethers "woodsies." The division of labor at such events is unbelievable. Sober drivers fill their jeeps, others gather firewood, and often someone would call Cass to ask him to keep the liquor side of his business open a little bit late. How far up the mountain a woodsie is held is determined by which cop is on duty. Certain cops will join a woodsy to chat, while others give tickets for the fire and underage drinking.

Woodsy sites are pitch-black clearings surrounded by pines and aspen. The high-elevation journey to get there is an experience in itself. I am reminded how scary riding up the

mountain is whenever I have friends visiting from Kansas and watch their reactions. It's not uncommon to drive over a boulder two feet high with one tire while hugging the edge of a drop-off. The "roads," if you can call them that, are cut into the side of the mountains and driving along cliffs is part of being from Ouray. You can't go slowly because you need the momentum to make it over large rocks, but you can't go too fast or you're likely to be "washboarded" off the road into scree pits (loose rock areas). Fearless mountain expertise is something Ouraynians claim with pride. No local person is scared of heights, or if they are, they are certainly too embarrassed to mention it in front of other residents.



Figure 25: Behind the bar at the Silver Eagle. Note the "You just can't fix stupid" sign and the stuffed squirrel waving an American flag at the top of the photo. Photo by author (2008).



Figure 26: The Silver Eagle's painting of Ouray, photo by author July 2010.

Once you calm down from the bumpy ride, the scenery at a woodsy is breathtaking. The fire casts an orange light that makes everything, including the people, more lovely. I've come home from a woodsy and discovered that my face was covered in soot. Personal grooming is simply not a priority when you're bundled up by a fire with friends. Usually about twenty people constitute a woodsy plus no fewer than five or six dogs. Deer frequently walk right up to the fire and it's not uncommon for people to get skunked while squatting in the woods. If you turn away from the heat of the flames, the mountain rims are barely visible as they are only a couple of shades darker than the black of the sky. It's hard to explain how easily one feels dwarfed by the scale of this place. The smell of crackling piñon wood, dirt kicked up by jeep tires, and crisp, cold air instantly wash away the stress of a twelve-hour day at work. It's for the

most part unspoken but nevertheless understood that everyone loves the aesthetics of a night in the mountains. You can always spot a newcomer because they are still counting shooting stars. Locals are used to the textbook clarity of meteors and constellations, but surely still appreciate it just as much.

The sense of community at a woodsy is thick. This is the place to trade stories and sales figures. Everyone tallies how many Texans they served that day and exchange tales of particularly funny tourists. There are certain questions you can't answer enough in a tourist town, like "Where's the best place to eat at?" or "Wow, what was it like growing up in such a place?" We all have memorized responses we can rattle off without thought. For instance, I explain how I'm a Kansan living in Ouray at least five times a day. Not as common, but great for woodsy storytelling are the dumb questions. Having seen Cascade Falls, people will ask things like: "What time do they shut off the water?" Or, perhaps worse, having traveled Red Mountain Pass (so named for its reddish, iron-rich soils from mining scars), they will ask "How do they paint a mountain red like that?" My personal favorite, however, is: "At what altitude do deer turn into elk?"

Stories around the campfire build community friendships and reveal clearly that the relationship of Ouraynians to tourists is one of love-hate. None of us would be able to live as we do without them, but it is hard to keep a straight face every day as the RVs roll in.

Chapter 5: Wild Meaning of Ouray:

Feelings of Place Held by Local Individuals and Groups

I asked each of my interviewees to place Ouray into a regional context, to tell me how they explain to other people where their town is located. Every single interviewee was specific. No one simply said that Ouray was in Colorado, or even in the Rockies. Every answer was an explicit set of directions that would take one to Ouray. The most open-ended answer I got was “Western Slope.” Only one interviewee left it at that, though. A lot of people mentioned the San Juans or the fact that the mountains are volcanic and craggy. More people mentioned that they always specify that Ouray is at a high elevation and isolated. Many used the region “southwestern Colorado” as context, but the most interesting part of this question was a hesitancy to define Ouray’s location at all:

I tell them it’s near Durango, Montrose, maybe Silverton, but I don’t say Telluride unless they are still really lost. I don’t like to mention Telluride because we’re nothing like that. Well, we’re nothing like those other towns either, but Telluride, you know, it has that reputation that we don’t want. I sometimes mention Telluride though, and get it over real quick. But, I have to follow up with details that make town different. I mention stuff like there’s no stop light, or the old historic buildings, or the crazy mountains. You want them to know how special it is. (Kenning 2008)

The hesitancy to associate Ouray with other nearby towns is quite strong. Several later-in-lifers and part-timers mentioned to me that they found it frustrating that the born-and-raised locals refuse to work with other communities in the region. Jennifer Loshaw, for example, told me about her plans to start a shuttle service between Ouray and Ridgway for events and daily commutes. She said the approval process was slow and it was hard to get people interested (Loshaw 2008). Rick Smith agreed with Jennifer’s general point, but added that the later-in-life locals were making progress to help Ouray survive. He explained that, through the Ice Park and

winter tourism, Ouray could prosper year-round now. He also said that a much younger crowd was buying up businesses in town, becoming elected officials, and making lots of changes. While I believe that Rick's observations are, for the most part, quite true about town, a lot of resistance still exists from long-time locals—a fact nearly all of my younger interviewees lamented.

I asked interviewees to group locals into any categories they perceived. Presumably the town might mean something different to each group identified. “Well there's men and there's women!” Ellis joked with me, but he went on to say that he thought length of residency best separated categories of locals. Similar to my own survey groupings of born-and-raised, later-in-lifers, and part-timers, almost all of my interviewees differentiated between the old families, the people who moved here on their own accord, and the part-time workers (e. g. Albritton, Corley, Ellis, Genuits, Kenning, Larson, Ricks, and Smith). A handful of other categories (or variations on categories) also emerged from this question that deserve to be noted here.

Several people wanted the “curmudgeons” of town to be their own category. Interviewees noted that curmudgeons were elderly people who congregated only in particular places (out front of the old bank or at the post office, for example) and were particularly resistant to change. Town for this group means their birthplace, where they raised their family and where their ancestors put down roots. Nothing about town should change for this group, because it has always functioned well for them. These people are part of what I have called the “born-and-raised” group, but a distinctive subset nonetheless. They are small in number but an important part of town, my interviewees said. Without them, town wouldn't be what it is.

Ouray has a surprisingly large homosexual community for a town its size and several interviewees mentioned that this group was one that they were pleased to have. Each of these

interviewees mentioned that they thought it noteworthy that Ouray had such a presence and how they felt proud to be able to boast such diversity in a small community.

Not so surprising, perhaps, is Ouray's Latino community. According to the 2000 Census, Ouray has 52 residents of Hispanic or Latino descent. Although this is a considerable portion of the town's population, the Latinos are often not considered true locals and sometimes are completely overlooked. None of my interviewees mentioned that this group should be given its own category of local. One member of the Latino population came up over and over again, however: Elias. He is an older man whose wife and children are still in Mexico. Elias has shown me tattered wallet pictures of his family many times and expresses that, while he loves Ouray, he wants to at least visit Mexico soon. He almost always wears black cowboy boots, black jeans, pearl-snap shirts and a baseball cap with the silhouette of Jesus on it. Those who have been out at night in Ouray have likely clinked beer bottles with Elias. He is an unavoidable pleasantry of Ouray's nightlife, always ready to hug fellow locals and chat in broken English. A night with Elias means no less than half-a-dozen exclamations of "Salud!" and that we will be "friends for life."

Many interviewees expressed not only their high regard for Elias, but the importance of such a representative to the Latino community. They claimed that if more of the Latino population made an effort to mingle in town and try to speak English as Elias does, then the groups would not be separate at all. Whether or not change could or should occur is not the point. Rather, it is the view that active striving to be part of the community as a whole is an important part of what many locals feel makes Ouray what it is.

While interviewees all mentioned part-time residents and the importance of their labor in town, there were many amendments to this catch-all category. Many interviewees were careful

to say that it's different if you come back year after year, which likely was because they knew I fell into that category! But, a strong sense of commitment to town denoted a different kind of part-timer in locals' eyes. Town for this group is a temporary home, but one that provides both income and entertainment. Long-time locals see and appreciate this careful balance between part-timers using the town and yet contributing to it. Many interviewees identified a transient element: back-country enthusiasts who do not work, Mexican laborers who often are segregated in particular areas of town, and recent school graduates who are finding their way in the world. These groups, many locals believe, belong in separate categories. They said part-timers weren't true locals if they camped or commuted to town. They were upset if such people did not pay income taxes or support local businesses. Still, despite all the complaints, most born-and-raised and later-in-life interviewees saw the part-timers as crucial to the town's survival. They also acknowledged that these people's decision to come back year after year shows that town means a lot to them, and that the local friendships they have made are reciprocally cherished.

Lots of long-time residents also noted a trend toward Southerners in town. A good third of the part-time worker population is Southern, particularly Mississippian. The association between Mississippi and Ouray can be traced through a couple of familial connections, but lots of interviewees saw something more going on. Yes, lots of these young Southerners come because they know someone or have a family member who has already been there, but their presence and that of Mississippi tourists may speak to a deeper lust for mountains in the hearts of these Southerners.

One long-time local business owner and English teacher in Ouray is a native of the Mississippi Delta who fell in love with Ouray. As the story goes, she overheard fellow Mississippian accents from customers and asked, "I'm from Mississippi! Where y'all from?"

To which a woman replied, “We’re from a part of the state where we know not to end our sentences with a preposition.” To which the storeowner replied, “Oh, I’m sorry. Where y’all from, bitch?” Whether or not this actually happened is beside the point. I heard stories like these over and over in my interviews—funny happenings between Southerners in a very Yankee state. While some residents expressed annoyance that Ouray was developing a Southern drawl, most were happy to have more friendly people around to sell merchandise, wait tables, and be new, local buddies.

Long-time residents are much more likely to complain about second-homeowners than part-time residents. These groups overlap, of course, but many interviewees made the distinction clear. Ourayites know they are a tourist community and need seasonal workers. What they do not want to be is an empty, second-homeowner town. Every interviewee was explicit in his or her opposition to having Ouray turn into Aspen or Vail, where tourism had transformed previously functioning small towns into hollow receptacles for money and attractions. Ourayites want their town filled to the edges of the basin with people who care about the place and call it home.

All interviewees were optimistic that people’s passion for this place will enable Ouray to ultimately survive. The town is and will remain different, they argue, because its growth is limited physically by mountain barriers, its harsh landscape attracts hardy individuals, and its tumultuous social history is cherished. Ouray prides itself in being more grounded and down-to-earth than other towns in the region. Many of my interviewees complained about the “airy-fairy” type of folk one might find in Telluride or even Ridgway. Ouray residents are pleased to say they have a collective “good head on their shoulders.” I believe it is this sort of local mentality that breathes credibility into the larger-than-life stories about town that locals hold dear.

Numerous hotels and buildings in Ouray date back to the 1880s and are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Entire books are dedicated to such historic landmarks. Doris Gregory's *Houses on Oak Street: A Walk Into History* (1982) takes a reader on a house-by-house historical tour of the town's western edge. Gregory has also written separate books on two of the town's historic buildings: *The History of the Wright Opera House* (1983) and *Ouray's Beaumont Hotel* (1990). Both of these buildings are treasured local sites. The Wright Opera House was originally built as an alternative source of entertainment to the local parlor houses and dance halls. After many transformations and enduring local usage, it is currently in the process of being purchased by local people and remodeled into a nonprofit venue. As the local signs proclaim: "It's the Wright thing to do!"



Figure 27: The Wright Opera House, photo by author August 2009.

The Beaumont Hotel's history runs as deep as that of the Wright. The three-story building was completed in 1887 with over fifty apartments, a grand restaurant, billiard room, numerous balconies, a full-service bar, and a bank (Figure 28). Without a doubt it was the finest, most luxurious hotel in southwestern Colorado. The lobby, solid oaken staircase, and rotunda were illuminated year-round by a large skylight and the guest list has included: Theodore Roosevelt, Herbert Hoover, and King Leopold of Belgium. However, perhaps unavoidably in Ouray's ruffian heyday, a waitress was murdered by a pastry chef a mere couple of months after the hotel's opening (Gregory 1989, 42). Such tragedies abounded in Ouray in the 1880s, adding a darker tinge to local landmark tours.



Figure 28: The Beaumont Hotel, photo by author August 2009.

A large hole exists in the twentieth-century history of the Beaumont, as a prior owner kept the building boarded up and painted pink for decades allegedly over a parking dispute with the city. Recently, however, this local eyesore has been transformed into a fully functional luxury hotel operated by Dan and Mary King, former summer residents of Ouray. They spared no expense and the Kings have received several awards for their efforts. More important to local people, however, the building is no longer a dilapidated reminder of a town that once was. Today the building looks nearly identical to the original and is a source of great pride.

The Ouray County Historical Museum is housed in the old St. Joseph's Miner's Hospital built in 1886. A visitor should not miss its "mermaid" and Jim, the stuffed bear (Figures 29 and 30). The "mermaid," a half-monkey and half-fish hoax, was allegedly stolen from the Ripley's Believe It or Not collection and somehow made it to Ouray. Jim the bear was a pet of a mining hospital doctor in the early days. The museum, though at times odd, holds lots of town memorabilia with a particular focus on mining. It is also a clear representation of local pride as it reflects the town character with its mix of standard historic relics and silly, superfluous items.



Figure 29: "Mermaid" at the museum, photo by author, August 2010.



Figure 30: Jim the bear, photo by author, August 2010.

Everybody is proud of the boom of the 1880s, the town's ability to withstand the Silver Panic, and the ongoing historical preservation efforts of today. Furthermore, most Ourayites also believe that their history never really died. From shaking beds at the Western Hotel (Figure 31) to pacing footsteps and misplaced items in the Beaumont Hotel, about half of my interviewees mentioned a ghost story of some sort and its importance to the meaning of the town. Many of these tales are corroborated by many and are told to tourists with regularity. The following story, written to me by Alison Kolowich, is one such example that has been included in a recent book: *Something in the Wind: Spirits, Spooks, and Sprites of the San Juans* (Martin 2001). Kolowich writes:

The 275 acres of land in the valley of Ridgway, currently known as Eagle Hill Ranch, was purchased by my grandfather in the 1971 when it was nothing but a

broken-down place, with a homestead cabin allegedly settled in the 1870s by Mike Cuddigan.

My dad visited Ridgway regularly. During his college years in 1973-1977 he fixed up the old cabin on the hill (which was located where the big barn is currently) and called it home for ski trips to Telluride or summer journeys to the San Juans. Upon his return to the cabin each summer and winter, he would walk through the door to find all of the cabinets in the kitchen open and his canned food out on the counter tops. He never understood how this happened, as he padlocked the door every time he left. There was no sign of entry into the cabin, everything else inside was left untouched, and there wasn't a neighbor for miles.

My dad fell in love with the area over the years and was finally able to move my family to Ouray, from New Orleans, in 1992 so my dad could take over the development of the ranch. My mom was reluctant to move to a secluded mountain town after growing up a "southern belle" in Kentucky, so my dad decided to take the family for a little drive to the ranch to show my mom his vision for development that had prompted our entire move. We walked around the property amazed by the incredible landscape and surrounding mountain views, but Kristin and I were young at the time, only 6 and 4 years old, and we quickly became tired of walking around. My dad wasn't finished showing my mom the property, so he agreed to let us stay and play down by the apple trees where they could keep an eye on us, while he and my mom trekked to the top of the hill so they could see the other side of the valley.

When my parents returned to take us home, Kristin and I were as happy as can be and started telling them all about our new friend we just met. "Mommy, can we come back and play with that girl again?" My parents were very confused and kept asking us what we were talking about. They could see us the whole time from where they were, never saw a little girl playing with us, and the closest house was just under a mile away. Kristin explained, "She was really nice but she was wearing a weird dress and had weird lace-up shoes." My dad asked where she went and we explained that she was shy and ran away when she saw them coming back. My parents didn't believe us and kept telling us there was no little girl and to stop talking about it. However, Kristin and I kept insisting, almost to the point of tears, that she was there, came to play with us, doesn't like grown-ups, and we want to go back and play with her. Eventually, Kristin and I stopped talking about the little girl we met that day by the apple trees.

My dad continued his plans for development on the ranch, but was reminded of the girl once again when one of the workers, who claimed to be clairvoyant, looked over at my dad one day and simply said, "the little girl's hungry, she wants some food."

It wasn't until months later, when my dad was reviewing water rights for the property, that he came upon an interesting bit of history involving the family that had lived on that property. The old cabin was originally occupied by Michael and Margaret Cuddigan who put their mark on Ouray history as victims of a brutal lynching. In the summer of 1883 Margaret gave birth to a little boy, and later that summer the couple was also chosen to foster an orphan from Denver by the name of Mary Rose Mathews. However, on January 12th, 1884, Mary Rose

was found dead and the couple was taken into custody for murder charges. It was discovered that the 10-year-old child had been raped, beaten, starved, frozen, and a final blow to the back of her head ended her short life. After severe editorial attacks aimed at the couple were published in the newspaper, a mob surged the Ouray jail, and seized the prisoners where they were hung just north of town. The body of Mary Rose was then carted off to Denver to be put on display to show the public the result of her brutal torture in order to justify the lynching of the couple in Ouray.

The cabin on the ranch was eventually burned to make room for the equestrian barn, and the spirit of little Mary Rose hasn't been seen since. But, a friend of ours, who also claims to be a medium, said that Mary Rose probably showed herself to Kristin and I because we were so young that we would never remember, and she felt safe with us. She also probably hung out around the apple trees because it was her only source of food on the ranch. The fact that she was starved to death would definitely explain the open cabinets in the cabin. My mom still laughs to this day about Kristin making the weird dress and shoes comment. Now that we know the time period of her life, she was probably wearing some type of frock and your basic black lace-up shoes. Pretty crazy stuff! Sometimes I wonder if I should go back to that spot and see if she is still there, or if she is finally gone since the cabin burned. I'm not really sure how that whole passing on thing works!

Alison's light-hearted nature about her ghost sighting exemplifies the general trend in town. Believe in ghosts? Sure. But talk about them as if they're some sort of supernatural phenomena that needs specialized analysis? Nah. While I was eating dinner at the Coachlight Restaurant recently, the owner came up to the second-story patio with a three-foot, nineteenth-century photograph behind shattered glass. "The ghosts are pissed off today," he said. "This picture just flew four feet off the wall into the middle of the dining room! I'm getting tired of having to move all our refrigerators all the time too because the ghosts keep unplugging them during services!" Ourayites simply accept that the ghosts are part of the local experience and contribute to the meaning of this place.



Figure 31: The Western Hotel, famous for its ghostly tales and the world's oldest jeep rental agency, photo by author August 2009.

The owner of the Silver Eagle bar, as discussed above, is not the kind of man who scares easily. I've seen him kick out inebriated, punch-throwing men twice his size, but ask him about Iva Phillips and his demeanor changes drastically. The Silver Eagle shares a common wall with a building that used to be a café where Iva worked. The Silver Eagle wasn't built until the 1960s, and so part of the building once was part of the next-door café. Iva, unfortunately, was brutally murdered in the early 1960s, and although an abundance of evidence was surely strewn around in the struggle, her case was hardly investigated. A man passing through town was arrested and charged, even though the case was weak. Cass, allegedly, had a strong suspicion of who the murderer was, but never ratted out that other local. According to stories, that person

(now dead) had an affair with Iva for many years and, after her murder, never walked in front of the old café, always crossing the street instead.

Cass told me that he knew Iva well. He had coffee with her every late morning as Iva liked to sleep in. He said that he also had a key to the café, because the Coors deliveryman needed to be let in for deliveries before Iva would wake up in the mornings. Cass said that the morning she died the Coors man came by to get the key as he always did, but returned immediately shouting that Iva was dead. Cass suspected she was just hung-over from her previous night's party, but when he checked he found her cold on the floor, nude, with a cold cream jar in her hand and a nylon stocking tight around her neck. He went to say that the man who was arrested had skipped town on a bus and when he was caught he only admitted to stealing money and cigarettes. Cass told me that, best he could tell, no one was at all confident that they had caught the murderer.

I spoke with one of my interviewees about Iva as well. Ellis told me that he remembered when she died, as he had recently spent the day with her in Montrose. After getting out of the service, Ellis was at the airport planning to hitchhike home to his parents' house in Ouray. Ellis said he ran into Iva at the airport and she offered to give him a ride. She bought him coffee and a meal before taking him back home. He mentioned how thankful he was for her kindness—it had meant the world to see a local face after military service abroad—and the shock of having her murdered in such a brutal way a couple of days later. To make matters worse, he said, the arrest of the man passing through was not adequate justice for most locals.

Many locals talk about the ghost of Iva haunting the building. The Silver Eagle owner told me that he often has unexplained happenings within the portion of his bar that belonged to the café. Once an old miner (well over six feet tall and 300 pounds) was helping him take out

the trash after hours. When that miner dumped the trash and turned around he saw Iva standing at the top of the ramp. With his face drained of blood, he vowed he would never set foot back of the bar again.

Like the owner of the Silver Eagle, most locals would not introduce themselves as spiritual people or even volunteer that they believe in “the unexplained.” But ask a resident if they’ve seen a ghost and you’ll likely get the reply, “Well, yeah, they’re all over this area.” Ouray people certainly do not want to advertise their ghosts. The spirits are simply there along with the other people. The balance between ghost town and historical town is actually somewhat tricky to maintain. The supernatural stories are subjects of several books (e. g. Henn 1999, Martin 2001), but they are not actively marketed as part of the tourism landscape in Ouray. On the various historical tours the supernatural lore is an invisible undercurrent to the facts, but one that is not explicitly cited.

Throughout this thesis I have emphasized how residents feel a sort of intangible pull to Ouray that made them stay. Many people talked about town’s “spirit,” but most were circuitous when talking about the source of that pull. “People come here to relax and get away from chaos,” described Alison Kolowich. “People come here to get away from where they’re from and they bring it with them,” said Ellis. “This place attracts woo-woo, ‘this-place-speaks-to-me’ kind of people as visitors, but those aren’t the people who stay. We call them ‘one summer crazy,’” said Myrna Spaulding. Pam Larson described to me the five-year rule: “If a family moves to town and stays longer than five years, then it’ll probably work out and they’ll be locals. Ouray attracts people who are looking for an inner peace, a connection to the basics and to the environment. In the five years they will learn if they can really live in this small town. Sure,

they love the natural setting, but will they miss museums? shopping? movies? They'll figure it out after five years."

Many of my later-in-life and part-timer interviewees described their first visits. Joann Ford told me that when she was offered a position as a church pastor, she entered town via Imogene Pass, an unpaved, four-wheel drive route to Telluride, often jokingly called "To-hell-u-ride." As she and her husband pulled into town she said: "I want a beer and a highway . . . in that order!" She elaborated by saying that she wasn't sure if it was town, or the beer, or the adrenalin from the bumpy ride that caused it, but she fell in love immediately. "I can't imagine not living here. Everywhere I go people greet me and know my name. But, it's more than that. This basin is just beautiful and we all know it and are thankful."

Anna Milner, a part-timer, told me she knew right away she loved the town. She is one of the Mississippians who came with a cousin by chance and never stopped coming back. "There are other towns with similar layouts, like Telluride, I guess, but it's not the same at all. The people are different there and the mountains aren't as in-your-face as they are here. I knew the geography was for me right away. I loved the power of the physical space." She told me later that it took time to understand her fellow residents: "In general people like the sense of being kept away from mainstream society. People who move here want a drastic change in their life. Once you live here for a while, though, you learn to love the safety net that this town provides. It's like a bubble away from real life . . . but in this incredible setting. It's really wonderful." Anna told me that every time she comes back to town she gets that same sense of belonging and reconnects with the landscape. As Carolyn Moorehead told me, "It's almost like the place is mystical or something. It gives me energy and I never thought I'd say things like that. When I come back I feel at home. I feel light, energized, and awake."

Myrna Spaulding also told me about falling in love with the place instantly. She couldn't put her finger on it exactly, she said, but it was snowing and nighttime, and through her high-altitude throbbing headache, the town was literally twinkling. She couldn't believe this glittery, small-town, postcard sort of place really existed.

The attachment to place in Ouray is so strong that every interviewee mentioned some sort of project, an idea they had for the town that they wanted other people to get on board with: a new development, a restoration effort, a new hiking trail. The passion to make the place better and yet retain its spirit is an ongoing struggle. Ouray is maintained by constant local effort—at all levels—to respect the powerful natural landscape, honor the history of townspeople, and keep the mystique alive.

Because 13,000-foot peaks surround Ouray, traveling around town involves major elevation hikes along with the traditional lateral means. Interviewees described an intriguing set of navigation terms. I paid extra attention to one word pair in particular: the terms “up” and “down” used to describe where a person is going.

In Ouray, the casual phrase “I’m going down to _____” is frequently used in a literal sense. Local residents would never say, for instance, that they were going “up to the pool” as the pool is lower in elevation than the rest of the town. If one asks a local for directions, the grid of street names or cardinal directions would never be used. Locals describe direction based on its relationship to the mountains. Phrases like “down the mountain” or “up Main Street” are common. In Lawrence, where the only noticeable hill is that under the university, I rarely hear someone use these terms to describe a literal change in elevation, the one exception perhaps being “up to campus.”

A second usage pattern for “up” and “down” in Ouray is with respect to surrounding towns. Many Americans use “up” to mean north and “down” to mean south. You would never hear a Lawrencian say, for example, that he/she were going “up to New Orleans.” This tendency is much less true in Ouray. My interviewees frequently mentioned going “down to Montrose” and “down to Ridgway,” towns to the north of Ouray, but lower in elevation. Sometimes “down” really did mean south (as in “down to Silverton” which is indeed to the south, but is at a higher elevation), but other times more subtle place perceptions were implied.

My interviewees’ preferences for certain towns over others aligned with their usage of “down” and “up.” An implied urban hierarchy exists in the area, atop which locals place Ouray. “Down to Silverton” did not always just mean south, it also implied an inherent dislike of the town. People of Ouray often complain of the hassle of traveling to Silverton, and in those cases “down” may indicate such an unpleasant obligation. Traveling to the similarly disliked town of Montrose was always preceded by “down to” as well even though the journey was to the north. In contrast, interviewees always said “up to Durango,” the pleasant college town south of Ouray. The strongest terms are reserved for Telluride, however. Whereas outsiders often use this wealthy, higher-elevation ski town west of Ouray as a geographical reference, Ourayites almost universally think of Telluride as pretentious and would never say “up to Telluride.” Instead that place is simply “over” or even “down.”

I argue that usage of “up” and “down,” like all local place descriptions, can be used to quickly identify insiders and outsiders. As several scholars have demonstrated, regional identity is very much tied to language usage (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2006, 163-165). Word usage can indicate a sense of place or a sense of belonging.

Because Ouray is so small, it's easy to see and experience all its nooks and crannies. I think that this idea of knowing a place in its entirety is another reason why place attachment runs so deep here. Unlike New York City, for example, where holes necessarily exist in mental maps and gaps linger in place comprehension, residents know Ouray wholly. What kind of attitudes towards place does that foster? From my research it seems that comprehensive knowledge gives residents a sense of order and predictability—a sense of what the place should be like and how things should go. Such knowledge of place also provides familiarity, but residents talk more in terms of ownership than of acquaintance. Born-and-raised locals in particular exhibited strong feelings of protectiveness over Ouray. Such protectiveness is reminiscent of Yi-Fu Tuan's concepts of "dominance and affection" in that local residents view their town as a beloved object that requires care like a pet (Tuan 1984). They want the town as it always has been and are wary of change. Ouray people must fight the flattening effects of modernity to keep their cultural depth alive and have their town remain the wild place they wish to be. They do not feel that they bear all the responsibility in this regard, however. Some things are simply out of their hands. Above them is the power of the physical geography. The rugged physical landscape, they believe, ultimately dictates what can be done in this place.

Epilogue

As this research project unfolded, it seemed to take on a life of its own. I set out simply to compare the observations I had made about Ouray with what my interviewees felt, but I was pleasantly surprised by the willingness of local people to share deep feelings about this place and about themselves. I was also surprised by what this research made me learn about myself and my connections to this town. When doing the interviews I could literally see eyes light up as people realized they were verbalizing feelings they had perhaps not recognized they had. The reciprocity within this thesis was invigorating, I believe, for all parties.

My focus evolved throughout this research as well. Initially I focused just on the town and not how this research would sit within the greater body of sense-of-place literature. As it turns out, of course, my extrapolation of Ouray as a naturally, socially, and meaningfully wild place is far from unprecedented. Mining communities often harbor pronounced place attachments against all odds with wild natural settings and wild social behaviors. Many reminiscences to mining eras continue to exist long after mine closure. Residents not only reflect on the past to construct meaningful identities of place and self, but also look to the future to imagine what means the town will have for survival.

Within the academy, mining communities are subject to extreme interpretations. They are both romanticized and demonized, but in either case almost always exaggerated. My work in Ouray suggests that strong place attachments, be they physical or emotional, may explain these exaggerated interpretations.

Residents of mining towns are often quite literally connected to the land and deeply rooted connections to the landscape lead to strong place attachments. In addition, these places

often are in transition as they move from an extraction industry to new endeavors, and this condition of betweenness may similarly harbor strong attachments to place.

This Ouray study has value, I think, in giving a local voice and nuance to a town that exhibits values at once odd and understandable. Ouray is wild, but it is an approachable and lovely place as well. As a small town, as a mining community, and as an isolated place it fits well into greater sense-of-place research. I feel honored to know Ouray as I do and I feel grateful for the opportunity to share this town with others.

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. How did you end up in Ouray?
2. How would you define local? Who is local in Ouray?
3. What makes Ouray unique or special to you?
4. How is Ouray like other places? What is universally true about Ouray?
5. Which, if any, other places would you compare Ouray to? Around here? Far away?
6. Are there any characteristics you would use to describe the people of Ouray as a whole?
7. How would you group locals in Ouray if you had to make separate categories?
8. Do you believe Ouray has a cohesive sense of community? If so, do you feel part of it?
9. In what ways do you think Ouray is an easy place to live?
10. In what ways is it difficult?
11. If you had to place Ouray into its regional context, where would you say it belongs?
12. Pick three iconic landmarks that most define Ouray.
13. Pick three activities a person must do to get the true sense of Ouray.

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